



## THE TWELFTH STEP

*This is the most powerful and moving novel on its particular theme since The Lost Weekend. Thomas Randall, the pseudonym of a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, has written an unforgettable story in which all the major characters have a common bond of suffering—they are alcoholics. Here is the deeply compassionate story of men and women who are forced to search their minds and souls for the true motivation of their activities. It is also the story—etched with searing realism—of their attempts to help themselves and others, of their struggle to establish new ideals and standards in place of the weakened foundations on which their lives thus far have stood.*



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Thomas Randall



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*For Beatrice, whose loneliness and suffering must have surpassed my own and whose courage and natural goodness certainly did.*

The people who have helped me would wish to remain anonymous so I can acknowledge my gratitude only to the groups to which they belong, those at Woburn and Reading, Massachusetts, at Concord, Tilton, and Laconia, New Hampshire, and at Mexico City. I should like, also, to express my sincere appreciation to the personnel of the New Hampshire State Alcoholic Clinic at which I received aid when I was desperately in need of it. I have never met Bill or Doctor Bob, the co-founders of AA, but the benefits of their vision and kindness have filtered down to me.

My consideration of AA is solely my own and in no way presumes to represent the attitudes of any other member or any group or the fellowship as a whole.

# BOOK I



# I

DAVID and Helen Le Grande were thirty-one years of age and were working at a highway hotel when they were overpowered for the fourth time. David was working as a bartender and his wife as a waitress in the cocktail lounge. It was David who collapsed first, having to remain in bed or pacing back and forth in the trailer in which they were living. Helen reported that he was suffering from intestinal grippe and for another three days she continued to work, taking three or four shots on getting up at noon and then sneaking innumerable drinks while she was working. But at the end of three days she could no longer hide the effects of her drinking with cosmetics. The task of getting up and dressing carefully was too great and she lay there while her husband finally did get his clothes on, and with an almost paralysing fear that he would be seen, went downtown and bought three more fifths. Two days later the manager of the hotel knocked at the trailer door. David and Helen, lying in bed, knew that an end was fast approaching. The knock set them both shaking and they whispered back and forth.

"Answer it," David said. "You look sicker than me. Tell him you've caught it now and will have to be out a week."

"I can't."

"You've got to. Don't open the door wide. Christ, we have to save this. A week and we can straighten out."

As Helen opened the door slightly, she said quickly, "You'd better not come in, Mr. Woolworth. We've got this virus and grippe. The doctor left a short time ago."

"Oh. I hope you get over it soon. Is there anything I can do? Do you need any food or fruit or a prescription filled?"

"No, no. We're all fixed. We're just so weak from it and I have quite a temperature. We'll be all right in a few days, back at work as good as ever."

"Well, you'd better get back in bed," Mr. Woolworth said. "Give me a ring when you think you'll be ready to come back. Make sure you're all right first. Good-bye."

When Helen returned and sat down on the edge of the bed, David lowered the covers from his head.

"What did he say?" he asked.

"Take care of ourselves."

"Oh, great. Hand me the bottle."

Helen passed him the ginger brandy. When David raised up and stretched out his hand it danced up and down and he realized he could handle now only quite large objects that would be heavy enough to outweigh the spasmodic jerking. With this realization the left side of his jaw began to tremble continuously so that his speech became disconnected, each sentence divided into three or four parts by a kind of spiritous punctuation. It was the shaking, in a lesser degree of course, which had at the start forced him to stay out, and the consciousness of it which had contributed to his sustained drinking. He just couldn't pour a drink for himself, let alone for customers at a public bar. This occupational deficiency was impossible for him to overcome without sobering up for at least a week. It was the decision to do something about it finally that made him sit up suddenly. He switched the bottle to his right hand which was somewhat quieter than his left, banged his teeth on the neck of the bottle, and gulped some brandy. He shook his head and then pounded his forehead with the heel of his hand several times.

"Okay," he said briskly. "Let's go."

He got up but on reaching his feet he staggered slightly and leaned against the wall, feeling a wave of fever and weakness and hopelessness flow through and over him. He straightened up and drank again.

"We got to get under cover. Greenleaf Hill. A week and we'll be back and who knows the difference? Come on. We can't sweat this one out."

"It's fifty miles," his wife said. "How are you going to drive?"

"I can drive. You can drive a little. Come on, will you? Put some clothes on."

"Oh God, again, again," she said, turning over and lying flat on the bed and feeling tears welling up. "How did it happen again? When will we learn?"

David set the bottle down and pulled her up straight.

"All right, all right," he said. "Cut it out. Take a belt now. We've got to get out of this."

Helen sat with her arms hanging for several minutes, staring vacantly at the floor, then she reached for the brandy, took a long drink, and stood up.

"There was a time four or five days ago when we could have stopped," she said.

"Yeah, yeah," he said, pulling on his pants. "That was then."

"If we lose this set-up, you'll be back on Scollay Square drinking Sterno and I'll be with you this time."

"Come on, we got to get out of here," he said.

The fears that were so indefinable were building up so that he shook more and he hurried out to the kitchen to peep through the Venetian blinds, as a criminal might, at the other trailers and the road. He saw no one. He listened for the phone and then remembered that the trailer had no phone and felt a little relieved because of this. He was disappointed that the day was bright and clear. He would have liked rain and darkness for protection against the world's stare, the policeman's glance, the suspicious look of a passer-by that would leave him frightened and quivering.

Helen was putting on a white blouse and a suit. She buttoned her jacket because her blouse was dirty, tied her hair in a pony tail, picked up a stray handkerchief from the bureau. David had been sleeping in his underwear and a sweater. He put on his jacket over the sweater, put on his shoes without socks. In his jacket pocket he found sixty dollars and his car keys. Helen in the meantime had gone into the tiny bathroom. When she came out she was clutching a toothbrush and a tube of paste.

They stood a moment in the small kitchen, vaguely aware of something undone. About the floor and in the sink, on the counter, on the couch, were empty beer and whisky bottles, papers, dirty glasses, empty cigarette packages, a stray towel, some underwear. The linoleum was covered with dried muddy footprints, dust, cigarette ash. A foul odour hung in the dust-laden air.

"The bottle," David said and hurried to the bedroom.

Helen looked around and saw a half-filled bottle of port wine. She picked up a crumpled bag and put it in.

"What time is it?" David asked.

Helen looked at the radio clock.

"Quarter past eleven."

"All right," David said briskly, efficiently, planning the campaign. "Now we both take a good hooker now. We drive one hour at twenty-five miles an hour. Then we rest and take another drink and if we're strong enough go in for coffee. Then another hour or a half-hour, another drink, a little further, and we're there. Then they give us the paraldehyde and we're safe, we're safe."

He thought a moment, looking at the ginger brandy that was getting quite low, below the half-mark an inch or so.

"But before we leave," he said, "we'll have to pick up a jug downtown."



"We can't, we can't," Helen said. "We can't risk being seen. The town's too small."

"There isn't another state store for forty miles," David said. "We can't run out. Christ, we can't run out. Come on, come on, get in the car."

They stood a moment longer, the trip looming larger and more difficult, a tremendous hazard requiring courage and planning and instinct, a torturous journey with pitfalls on every side, enemies lurking along the road, poison within them working toward their collapse, insanity prodding their multiple fears, their bodies screaming for nourishment, the alcohol racing feverishly through all the small veins and arteries, and the hostile world like a heavy weight pressed against them so that their breath was short.

"We can't make it," Helen said. "I need rest. Give me two hours in bed."

"No, come on. Rest in the car."

"Davey, give me another drink before we start."

"Okay, kid."

When she handed the brandy back, David looked at her and from somewhere in the past, below the level of his drunkenness, a small sense of love and pity arose and he kissed her forehead gently.

"Don't worry," he said.

It was a mile to the state store. As he drove he grew more feverish. The car was old and had an engine knock. He remembered the petrol gauge. The tank was almost empty. Helen shut her eyes. It seemed as if the mile took a half-hour or more to cover. The sunlight was painful.

When they reached the edge of town they both began to look back and forth nervously for anyone who might recognize them.

"You go in," David said. "Get a fifth of hundred proof."

"I can't go in," Helen said. "I'll faint. I'll fall down or something. I look worse than you. I'm all flushed and my eyes are shot."

"I'm shaking too much," David said. "They won't give it to me."

"So you're shaking. Maybe you got Parkinson's disease or something. At least you're pale. You don't look like an alky."

David pulled into the kerb.

"Look," he said. "I can't go in. Christ, I can't even count out the money. You don't shake like I do even if you do look worse. Bend down out of sight and take a good shot, then hurry in. Take the money out of my side coat-pocket."

Helen got a small metal folding cup from the glove compartment,

put it on the floor, and filled it. She shoved the bottle under the seat with the half bottle of wine; then, waiting till no pedestrians were near, she swallowed the brandy quickly, got out of the car, and walked swiftly to the liquor store.

When she came out David sighed with relief. He saw that the package she carried was two bottles. Helen smiled and waved a little as she approached, happy and gay at her accomplishment and beginning to feel a little more drunk than sick.

He started the motor and began a U turn, jammed on the brakes as a car loomed up from behind.

"You had a couple of shots I didn't have," David said. "Pour me one in that cup."

Helen reached under the seat and poured out a drink.

"I got two fifths," she said. "How are you going to drink it?"

"Wait till I stop."

"Even stopped how are you going to drink it?"

"What in hell do you get so mixed up for?" David said, as he pulled the car to a stop beyond the edge of town. "What do you mean how am I going to drink it, what do you mean?"

"Here's the cup."

David stared a moment and said, "Give me the bottle." He held it with both hands, gripping it as tightly as he had the steering wheel, but even so he banged his teeth as his shaking hands and jaw tried to co-ordinate.

They passed the trailer park they had left. David retched several times but managed to keep the drink down. Helen looked at the brandy in the cup. If she tried to get it back into the bottle, it might spill. She couldn't throw it away. She drank it.

"Oh, God," David said. "I'm blind. I can see the line and the shoulder and that's all."

"That drink will pick you up in a minute," Helen said. "We need petrol. When we stop I'll drive a while."

"Let me get in five miles or so, anyway. Oh, man! This is the worst I've ever been."

"I'll have to call that we're coming. I hope my mother don't find out."

"To hell with her. It's only us now."

"Davey, this time may be the last time for us. Next time it may be the cracker factory for us."

"You'll have to drive now," David said.

Helen started to open the door.

"Don't get out! You'll stagger. Climb over me."

They twisted and turned, changing places.

"I never stagger. I only wallow," Helen said.

"For Christ's sake, stop being clever."

David took another shot.

"It's not funny," he said. "It won't be funny coming off it."

"Leave us forget that," Helen said, driving back onto the highway.

"If we get caught driving, we'll be in the can. Watch out for cops now. And don't look at them as if you're guilty of something. Look sober anyhow."

Tears filled Helen's eyes and rolled down her cheeks. She cried without sobbing.

"If this comes out, I'll never get Douglas back," she said.

"Oh, forget it for now, Helen. Just concentrate on getting to the Hill. Forget everything but that."

The car was weaving slightly.

"Steady, steady," David said. "God, I'm sick. That drink hasn't done anything. Just making me hot. What day is it? Was Woolworth mad? I mean underneath?"

"Rot and ruin," Helen said. "Oh, God, I can't stand this any more. What's left? There isn't even any fun any more. Three or four days' fun and three weeks sick, a week in the hospital, two months forgetting. What a routine! And I'm breaking up. I look like a hag. I'm done this time, Davey, and if I'm not done with you, I'm done without you."

"What, what?" David cried, jerking so that his body turned sideways. "Done, done? What are you talking about?"

Helen turned into a petrol station and David hastily shoved the bottle under the seat. Helen told the attendant to fill the tank and went inside to phone. She was rather surprised that she remembered the Greenleaf Hill number so easily, not having heard it for several months. Mrs. Thurston, the owner's daughter, answered the phone. Helen despised her but now she tried to hide her contempt.

"Helen Le Grande," she said. "How are you?" She made her voice bright and cheerful.

"Oh, fine. I haven't heard from you in some time now. Let's see, it's a little over two months, isn't it? How are you?"

"Well, David and I are on our way down to see you now."

"Oh? What's wrong?"

As if the bitch doesn't know, Helen thought.

"Well, we need a little rest again."

"Come right along. We'll be glad to see you. There's plenty of room and Dr. Reisner knows you so well."

When she hung up, Helen leaned her forehead against the phone box as a wave of dizziness went over her. She pushed herself away from the wall and began to walk with her feet spread apart somewhat and consciously bracing herself against the floor with each step.

"What did they say?" David asked.

"I talked with the bitch. The usual thing, trying to make me feel small. I should be overwhelmed with gratitude to pay eighty-five dollars for board and room and a few doses of pracky. Take the top off the bottle for me."

Driving slowly, with one hand, Helen waited till no cars were approaching and then tipped the bottle up. She had expected the taste of whisky but David had handed her the ginger brandy. The taste was so startling she gagged, closed her lips tightly, and swallowed the brandy a second time. Her eyes filled with tears so that she could not see the road clearly for a few moments.

"I wanted the whisky," she said hoarsely.

"Sorry," David said. "I didn't notice."

He held up the bottle. There were only a few ounces left and he drank them. He lowered the window and tossed the bottle out into some brush.

"Can you drive?" Helen asked.

"Jesus, no."

"I'm about done."

"How far have we gone?"

"Ten miles? Twenty miles?"

"Pull in to the first cabins you see."

But no cabins appeared. Time was prolonged. Helen fell into a numb, silent, morbid illness that had only the saving grace of seeming somehow to be suspended, as if her heart and pulse had stopped and her malady had an abstract duration. She wondered idly, Am I in worse shape than David? She felt for the time no tremors. Was it a good sign? Suddenly her lethargic suffering was shattered with terror. She drove sharply off onto the shoulder of the road and jammed on the brakes so that David was thrown against the panel. He cursed briefly as she slumped over the wheel, moaning softly with her eyes shut. David straightened himself and looked at her.

"Okay, okay," he said gently. "Just stay there a moment."

He got out and went around the rear of the car with one hand pushing against his lean.

"Just ease over now," he said.

Helen pushed herself along the seat and lay with her head back,

hearing his voice from a distance, hearing the car start again, feeling the motion, feeling her heart beating now, and with her eyes still shut reaching around for the bottle.

"It's under the seat," David said.

He stopped the car, found the bottle that was open, looked up and down the road, and took a long drink.

"Here," he said. "But don't hit it too hard. Wait till we get holed up so you can get to bed."

A mile farther along some cabins appeared. David sighted them when they were still some distance off and now the thought of negotiating frightened him. He stopped the car.

"There's the cabins," he said, quaking. "Can you straighten up a little? Am I shaking too bad? God, put on some lipstick or something."

He took another drink and waited.

It didn't turn out too badly. The manager came out so that David did not have to leave the car.

"We've had a long drive and my wife isn't feeling too well," David said to explain their stopping so early in the day.

"Take the middle cabin there," said the manager.

David looked at the cabins and the landscape. The end cabin was almost hidden by some small pines and the driveway would be out of sight.

"How about the end one?" he asked.

"That's all right. The price is six dollars. You know you're lucky you stopped. They're checking cars for some reason about a mile down the road and they sure would smell you."

When David had driven to the end cabin and they were hidden from view, Helen sat up with sudden animation, smiling with a ghastly vivaciousness.

"It's like old times," she said. "Overnight cabins on the pike and overnight binges on a pint."

"It don't rhyme and it has goddam little reason," David said. "It was long, long ago when a pint was enough. You know if we hadn't stopped, we'd be in the can, don't you? Fish out the bottles and see what we got."

There was a full fifth and a half fifth and a half quart of wine.

In the cabin they lowered the shades, put the bottles on a table between the twin beds, and lay down.

The room was dim and sheltering, and both of them now were feeling a warm haze, the sickness lessened with the safety of bed and the knowledge that they were hidden effectively from all ques-

tions, from all acquaintances, from the insecurity of everyday work and responsibility, from the eyes of people and the responses people required, from all problems, from the worry of all fears, from all of life even. Yet they retained some awareness, awareness of each other lying in separate beds, of the comforting dimness both of light and thought. Awareness now of the complete sedation of the alcohol, awareness of the fine irresponsibility that made them untouchable, wearing the gossamer armour of indifference that was stronger than all the counsel they had ever received from those strong despicable people who had been forever coating them with advice. They were without desire, without hope, without sin or virtue, and without time. Life was a distant humming.

Their hands touched as they both reached for the bottle on the table. They shook hands.

"Allow me," David said, passing the bottle. His hand was fairly steady now.

She raised herself and took a drink.

"Have one, dear," she said.

"Thank you, dear, I will. God, I'm blind. But it feels good now."

"Wake me up in the morning, dear."

But in the evening of that day they both awoke. The sound that awoke Helen was David's retching. He was on his hands and knees in the middle of the bed and he was gasping and retching in long torturous rattles. David was the type of alcoholic who is generally pale but now his face was congested, his eyes were streaming, and sweat stood out on his forehead. The overhead light was on. He was still fully clothed. Helen took a big drink with the hope that it would knock her out again. She did not feel as sick as she had on waking up that morning. She closed her eyes again but in a few moments she knew she would not sleep immediately and she arose and went for a glass of water. David fell prone, rested briefly, and reached for the bottle.

"If we started now we could make it tonight," Helen said. "It can't be very late."

"Get dressed then."

David found it easier driving in the dark. The dividing line was newly painted. He followed it carefully. He gripped the wheel tightly to control his shaking, lowered the window for the fresh night air. But the left side of his jaw was trembling more than ever and in a short time he began shivering and closed the window. Helen sat with her head back and her legs spread apart.

"Davey," she said. "I haven't any pants on."

"I can't think of anything less important."

"There's stars out, Davey."

"And policemen, too."

"We blew it again, didn't we?"

"God, I'm blind. Give me the bottle again."

"That's all we've got. I'll lose Douglas for good. I know it."

"How will anyone know?"

"Oh, my mother will find out. It always comes out. The case comes up in November. This is the clincher."

"Forget it, forget it. Take a drink and you can drive in a minute. I'll be running off the road. I can hardly hold the wheel."

He stopped the car.

"We should have stayed where we were."

"Forever?" Helen said. "We've got to keep moving. I'll drive a while if you let me keep the window open."

"I'm frozen."

"With all that booze that's impossible. There's a blanket in the back."

They changed places and David wrapped himself in the blanket. He pulled the blanket over his head and closed his eyes and tried desperately to shut himself in, away from everything. He felt the car starting again. But he was afraid not to see and he lowered the blanket and watched the dark trees blot out the stars now and again, listening to the sound of the tires and the engine knock, and wanting to be unconscious once more. He remembered the politician face of his father, whom he hated, the cigar, and the men's voices, the smoke, and forever the men talking in a low distant surge, and the loneliness after his mother had gone—his mother who, even drunk, was soft and kind and sheltering.

"She hung herself," he said out loud, feeling a sudden impulse to hear his own voice saying the words. His voice seemed to come from somewhere beyond himself. "She was a drunk like me."

"Oh, God, don't get on that," Helen said. "I've got all I can do to steer this thing."

"I don't think he cared at all. He could have helped her, couldn't he? Couldn't he?"

"I don't know. How can you know now?" Helen asked. "How can you know all the things, or what it was?"

"He didn't give a goddam about anything but his big blown-up self in city hall. That's all. That's all there was to it."

The bottle was on the seat between them and Helen found it, un-

screwed the cap, with the steering wheel held only by the pressure of her hands against it, and took a quick drink as she saw the road stretching straight ahead.

"The bastard. All he did was give me money, chase me away with fifty bucks so he could talk in the hotel room and me roaming the New York streets, drinking in the bar-rooms at sixteen, and suddenly the son of a bitch is horrified because I'm drinking and chasing pussy."

"For God's sake, quit warming it over," Helen said. "I can drive but I want to drive quiet."

David took another drink and in a few moments was asleep or at least unconscious. Helen knew that he had passed out. The car began to weave somewhat and she lifted her foot from the petrol pedal till it seemed to steady itself once more. She was driving very slow but even so she was having difficulty keeping the car away from the shoulder. There was a humming in her head that blended itself with the sound of the tires. And finally, very carefully, she pulled off on the shoulder somewhere in the infinite night, turned off the ignition, and slumped over the wheel, gasping, hot, and shuddering. She roused herself briefly to take a drink and then leaned back to fade into a blessed coma.

When David awoke everything was dark. He put out a hand and touched his wife and then he knew he was on his way to Greenleaf Hill, somewhere on his way at night, some night, somewhere from a distance that must be spanned. He shook his wife and heard only her moan. He got out of the car and pushed the door shut. His legs were not too weak. He actually walked around the car without support. Opening the door on the driver's side, he pushed his wife over and got in. The bottle had been pushed along too but he finally found it between the seat and the door. Another drink and another shake and he felt for the ignition and the lights. When the lights were on and the engine started, he peered ahead for a few moments before starting.

What he wanted to see now was light, from a service station or a diner, or even a traffic light, anything that might help him in his effort to think again, something to delineate the darkness, to put boundaries back on dark space. And suddenly there was a diner. He pulled in and shut off the engine. With a great effort, channelling all his strength and holding his mind steady, he entered the diner, asked for coffee, and sat there sipping the scalding liquid.

"Can you give me one to go?" he asked.



He was terrified when he could find no money in his jacket pocket and then relieved as he felt some bills in his pants pocket. He wanted to ask the counterman how far it was to Massachusetts but he was afraid of uncovering his uncertainty.

"Are you all right?" asked the counterman.

"Just tired," he said.

He carried the paper cup back to the car, got in, and tried to rouse Helen. He began to cry a little.

"Oh, Helen, Helen, here," he said. "Oh, wake up. God, don't leave me here like this."

Suddenly she asked, "Where are we now?"

He got out of the car and went back to the diner.

"Have you got the right time?" he asked.

"It's twelve-thirty."

"Are there any cabins near here?"

"About two miles down the road. Boy, you're loaded. Take it easy or you'll be sleeping in the hospital or jail."

"Do I really look bad?" David asked.

"It isn't that you look so bad. You look like St. Vitus with a hang-over. That's how bad you're shaking. Do you want a drink to straighten you out?"

"No, I've had a drink," David said.

## II

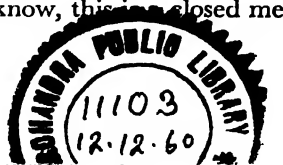
### 1

THE chairman put out his cigarette and tapped the gavel. The men in the hall sought out seats, some of them carrying cups of coffee. There followed the scraping of chairs, coughs, and a stray laugh marking the fall of silence.

The chairman looked around and said, "This is the regular Friday-night meeting of the Auburn group of Alcoholics Anonymous. We'll open in the usual manner with a moment's silence to be used as each of you wish."

During the few moments some men shut their eyes and bowed their heads, others smoked unconcernedly, still others sipped coffee. The chairman tapped once.

"As you all probably know, this is a closed meeting for men only



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and we will assume everyone here is an alcoholic or at least has a boozie problem. My name is Jack, and since I don't give a goddam who knows I'm a member, my last name is Morris. Now I'm not chairman because of any special ability but simply because it's my turn. I have been dry six years. Six years without a drink. I don't say this to boast but only as an example of what this programme can do. And if there is a new man here tonight who has the jigs and the sweats, is filled with fears and problems, let me tell him I've known all that. I've had the dry heaves, the hot and cold shakes and sweats, the resentments, the self-pity and self-disgust, and all the Christly complications that only a drunk can know."

Behind the speaker, who was sitting at an old scarred table, was a large banner with a blue background and gold letters which read, "But for the Grace of God." This banner was flanked by three smaller ones bearing the slogans, "Live and Let Live," "Easy Does It," and "First Things First."

"I lost job after job, was jailed twice, lost my driver's licence, was hospitalized. I had lost the respect of everyone, including myself. So I say to that new man, if you've been hurt as badly as me, you can do it. If you haven't been, maybe you can latch onto this before you are. At any rate, take it easy. Sit back and listen."

Towards the rear of the room on an aisle seat, Ralph Hilton shuddered, was quiet a moment, then shivered a half-dozen times in a smaller spasm. His forehead was beaded and sweat dripped down from his armpits. He was dressed neatly, was shaved, had a grey moustache, silver temple hair, a firm jaw and chin, heavy dark eyebrows. The high colour of his complexion added to his impressiveness. He had telephoned central service early that afternoon and since then had consumed a pint of one hundred proof whisky. He was the new man about whom the chairman spoke.

"There are no musts in this programme. Everything is suggested only. There are no dues or fees, no membership cards or rules, no duties. Our organization is as loose as a two-dollar call girl. We're not associated with anything, neither politics nor religion nor charities. The purpose of this fellowship is simply this, to help the poor bastardly drunk get sober and stay sober, and the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. You, the new man, are the most important man here. There are probably fifty men present. If you are shaking, they are all shaking with you. If you get sober and stay sober, fifty men will be as happy as you will be. Well, that's enough for me now. I'll let another drunk tell you about himself. Nick, will you say a few words?"

Beside Ralph Hilton sat Tom, a newspaper man who had been asked by central service to go to Hilton's home. Tom was pale, thin, with a fragile, professorial appearance. He was wearing rimless glasses.

"How does it go?" he whispered.

Ralph leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, a familiar pose at these meetings.

"Christ, I'm sick," he muttered, shaking once more.

Ralph straightened up, wiped his forehead with his bare hand, and looked around at the calm, composed faces about him.

Nick walked to the front of the room and leaned on the speaker's rickety table. He looked down at his hands a few moments, then he lit a cigarette and looked up briefly at the ceiling.

"Well, I'm Nick," he said. "An alcoholic. I drank a lot of booze. In three stages. First I drank it because I wanted to and it gave me a lot of fun. Then I drank it because I needed it. Then I drank it because I couldn't stop. Those three stages happen to most of us, whether we're high-bottom drunks or low-bottom drunks. I spent many years trying to learn how to drink. I didn't want to be a drunk. None of us do. I tried to stay sober by drinking only beer. Then I tried wines. Then I quit smoking because I heard that old line that it was the cigarettes that was making me feel sick. I tried to space my drinks. Once I had a good-paying job and I figured I had the answer. I'd drink only Canadian Club. But you know I got just as sick and drunk from that as I did from lemon extract and canned heat. It went down so good I just drank more of it. Somehow I never learned that simple thing, that alcohol is alcohol no matter how it is made, no matter what the label says. Nor that other simple thing we learn here, that it's the first drink that gets you drunk. It's the first drink that sets up the compulsion. As simple as that. If you don't have the first drink you sure as hell won't have the tenth. Now I know I can never again take a drink in safety.

"Two years ago I was in a strait jacket in Boston City Hospital. Dogs I used to see, with red mouths. Well, they snapped me out of it and I got discharged with a pair of dungarees, a sweat shirt, and a pair of sneakers. No underwear, no socks.

"It wasn't hard for me to admit I was an alcoholic, to take that first step. Alcoholic sounded good after being called a no-good drunken bastard, a rum-dum. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable. That's the first step. Christ, I had known that for years, but not in those words. But I didn't know what to do, how to start. Here we start this way.

We go one day without one drink. Twenty-four hours, that's all. You don't swear off, you don't sign a pledge, you don't promise anything. We've broken enough promises during our lives. You don't do it for the wife or the kids or the boss or the probation officer. You do it for yourself, because you're so goddam sick of being sick, because you can't stand yourself any longer, because you want help, you need help, and you accept help. One day without one drink. The days add up. You recover physically first but your screwed-up thinking takes a little longer. That's why we need to attend meetings. You can't do it alone. You need help and the only one who can really help a drunk is another drunk.

"How do we get help? The second step says, we came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. That's hard to admit because we're arrogant bastards. What's the power? Whatever you pick. Whatever you put your faith in. The group, maybe, at first, because many of us have lost our religion or give it only lip service. But sooner or later most of us use the word God. I get up in the morning. I pray, God keep me sober this day. At night I thank God for helping me. I've turned my will and my life over to God as I understand Him. That's the third step. I'm accepting what I've got.

"But this is only my way. Yours might be something else. That's all right. That's the good part of this programme. No laws. You take what helps you. What keeps one man sober can make another man drunk."

"I've got a wife and two kids," Nick continued. "I haven't seen them for five years. They're out in the Middle West. It got so nobody could come to the house for fear I'd be laying there drunk or ranting away. So they threw me out finally. They were right. I got married and my wife loved me and then for fifteen years she watched me fall apart at the seams. What could I expect? How did I start drinking, why did I become a drunk? It don't matter now, the reason, because I've found a way of staying sober. But I was always scared and the booze made me feel big. I was scared I would fail, I was scared of the boss, I was scared of being drunk, I was scared of being sober. But now I don't have any fears. What more could happen to me? I've turned my will and my life over to God and nothing now can really hurt me. When I get lonely I think of the men and women in AA who have helped me, friends asking nothing of me but a chance to help. And I thank God for keeping me sober and for my friends and for AA. There's one other thing.

All my life I couldn't talk and mean anything. Now I talk and it does mean something."

All his life he couldn't talk, Ralph Hilton repeated in his mind. It didn't mean anything and now he talks. And I always lied for fear of hurting others, and because I was afraid of emotional disturbance too, because when I was young I tried earnestly to be honest and people hated me for it.

"What time is it? When is it over?" he asked.

"It's nine-fifteen. The meeting ends at ten. But you don't have to stay. I'll drive you home whenever you say."

"I'll stay a little longer."

"We are told this is a threefold sickness," the chairman was saying, "a disease, physical, mental, and spiritual. Booze doesn't affect us like other people. It enters our bloodstream more rapidly and sets up somehow a compulsion that we can't overcome. All my friends used to wake up with a headache. I never had a headache from drinking. Some of them got sick and threw up their dinners. They lay down and the room spun around from their dizziness. These were normal reactions. But I just drank and drank, a two-fisted drinker. Oh, yes. But midway through the next day when they were recovered, I'd fall apart with nervousness and depression. I'd jump at noises. My hands would begin to shake. I'd sweat. And I'd have this nameless ruin-sickness.

"And can anyone doubt that it affects the mind? The simplest problems used to loom like mountains. I could never make up my mind to anything except a drink. Why, I reached such a pitch of indecision I was afraid to go into a two-hole outhouse."

The chairman grinned and waited for silence to settle.

"I don't know much about spiritual matters. I was never unkind to anyone but neither was I kind. I'd pick up an old lady if she fell down; I never would think of doing anything to prevent her falling. Perhaps one of the greatest things we gain here beyond our sobriety is this acquaintance with the simple act of kindness and the joy it can give.

"Willis, can I call on you for a few words?"

"My name is Willis and I am an alcoholic. As quite a few of you know, I am a lawyer and I live in another town. I attend meetings of this group because in my profession, at least for the present, I need my anonymity protected. This anonymity should be extended to everyone here. What transpires at this meeting, the names of other members we meet, should remain the knowledge of only those present. But this practical aspect of anonymity—the social and pro-

fessional protection of members—is really only the lesser part of it. The real value of anonymity is this, that it is the measure of our humility. We don't take an egotistical pride in our sobriety. We don't publicize ourselves because we are dry for a few months or years, boasting that we are leading lives that we always should have led anyway. That is not the AA way. If I have had a sort of rebirth, I can't honestly say I achieved it. Rather it was given to me by this group and by some power greater than myself.

"Before I go any further, I'd like to say that whatever thoughts I express are things that have helped me. There is no dogma in AA, no tenets, no catechism. There is only an interchange of thought and help. I have to speak within the limits of my experience and knowledge. I don't know what it is like to sleep in a flophouse so perhaps the fellow coming up from skid row won't feel close to me. To that man all I can say is that my shakes from bottled-in-bond were the same as his from cheap wine. He was scooped up and sent to the county jail or the psycho ward, I paid a doctor to come to my house. But each of us hit his bottom. The only difference is that we were shaped by different sets of circumstances. That's all. We're both drunks, both victims of that great leveller, alcohol.

"Now I was a great bottle-hider. The courtrooms of this fine state have all been honoured by my bulging briefcase which I was forever carrying with me to the men's room as though it contained documents so precious that I could not allow it out of my sight. My home to this day has many bottles tucked away in forgotten places. Some of them I am sure are half-filled, for I was one of those tragic drunks who would hide a bottle, fall asleep, and forget where it was hidden. That God-awful, trembling, frantic searching!"

At the mention of hidden bottles, Ralph Hilton was suddenly rigid with attention, remembering the bottles in his bureau drawers, along the cellar rafters, in the attic trunk, the four-ounce bottle he had carried for years in his back pocket. Tom glanced at him and smiled slightly.

"I don't know exactly what makes a man hide bottles. I suppose a psychiatrist could tell us the complete reasons. One of the reasons I hid them was because of the tremendous load of shame and guilt I carried. And I'd like to say now how grateful I am for a corresponding relief I have felt in being able to admit this to other alcoholics. Another reason was to avoid censure by my associates. But most of all to avoid the censure of my wife. Well, censure is really too mild a word for that. I was reprov'd, reprehended, rebuked, upbraided, browbeaten, damned, denounced, cursed, ostrac-

cized, excoriated, and excommunicated. The only thing I could do in defence was to knock myself out in my room with the door shut and locked. For this there was always a fifth nestled safely under the mattress."

The speaker shuddered and so did Ralph Hilton, but beneath his illness was a growing amazement, and perhaps some hope, and yet intermingled with it a lingering doubt about being alcoholic: some last vestige of pride that whispered that perhaps he might beat this thing by himself, though he had tried earnestly time and time again, or that, perhaps, it was really only a symptom of some underlying trouble and not, as these men claimed, a disease in itself. But then the shaking destroyed any semblance of consecutive thought.

"To put our book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, in circulation we raffle one each week. The tickets are twenty-five cents. We'll have the raffle now and any announcements the secretary has."

There was a flurry of movement and conversation and under cover of this Tom took Hilton by the arm and walked to the street. Ralph leaned against the building, breathing deeply and with difficulty.

"Christ, I need a drink," he said.

"There's no doubt of that. Come over to my car," Tom said.

In the car he reached under the seat and brought up a pint. It was an unopened bottle and to Ralph it seemed an endless time as Tom scraped at the cap seal. Once he made a gesture as if to take the bottle himself. He thought suddenly, with a humming in his ears, This is like pneumonia. Everything was distantly hot. Tom had to rap the bottle against the steering post to loosen the cap.

"Easy now," he said. "Take what would be a double shot. We're working for a breaking-off point somewhere."

Hilton took the bottle. His hand shook so that he put his other hand over the neck of the bottle to stop the whisky from spilling. But now he had the bottle in his hand, the hard feel of it, the knowledge of security, his breathing fell, he shook once, and a small separate calmness suddenly stilled all the hundred tiny inward spasms. He stared at the bottle in his hand. A minute went by. Tom remained silent. Finally Hilton screwed the cap back on the bottle.

"Tell me," Tom said. "How did you drink the last two years?"

"I drank some every day, a lot Friday night, Saturday, and part of Sunday. Then every three months I had three or four really bad days and had to stay in bed a day or so."

"Did you have blackouts?"

"Blackouts?"

"Loss of memory. Did you wake up in the morning sometimes and wonder what had happened the night before?"

"Yes."

"What did you drink? Listen, you don't have to tell me anything, of course. You can even lie to me. But there wouldn't be much sense to it because I'm a drunk from way back and I've done it all myself."

"Well, if I had some spare money I drank whisky and beer. If I was short I drank wine because it's the cheapest drunk."

"I know," Tom said. "Did you ever have a doctor?"

"Twice. Six months apart."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, he told me to cut down and quit worrying."

"Doctors don't know much about us. Anything else wrong?"

"No. Jesus, I'm shaking."

"Look," Tom said. "If I were you I'd take a good belt of that booze."

Hilton jerked violently. "What is it?" he said. "You say you want to get a man sober and keep him sober. You tell me to take a shot."

"Well, you're sick," Tom said. "I don't know how sick you are, but you do. When you're that way, there's only one thing that helps. A drink. There's all kinds of opinion about a breaking-off point. It's up to you really. But I'd like to see you go back in to the meeting and if a drink will help, I'm all for it. You see, one little thought may strike you and give you a starting point toward sobriety. I don't want to fill your head with a lot of talk. There's only one thing to learn tonight, if you can. Two things, rather. You're not alone, not by a long, long measure, and you don't have to drink to live and enjoy living. Don't be ashamed to take that drink."

Hilton unscrewed the cap, raised the bottle, filled the cavity of his mouth, and gulped. His self melted and flowed almost at once. Tom took the bottle and put it back under the seat.

"What do you say?" he asked. "Shall we go back in?"

"Sure," Ralph said. "Thank you."

"It's nothing," Tom said.

## 2

The last speaker was a relatively new man, having been sober for three months. This was his first time speaking. He was extremely



nervous when he started to talk. He ran his hand through his hair, rubbed his cheek, leaned on the table, straightened up. He was about thirty years old, well dressed, and bore no physical signs of alcoholism. His voice was low.

Ralph Hilton, quieted somewhat by the drink he had had, listened intently.

"I don't know much yet about the AA programme beyond the first two steps," the speaker said. "I suspect it is something that you grow with over the years. I suppose the most valuable thing I've learned since coming to meetings is to isolate my drinking problem and to realize that it can never be cured but can be permanently arrested. Since I was always ashamed of not being able to control my drinking, I was always looking for and finding excuses for it. My wife was angry at me, so I drank. The job was going badly, so I drank. I was feeling tired all the time, so I drank. Actually, of course, the reverse was true. My wife was angry, the job was difficult, I was always tired, because I drank.

"Today I had the best excuse for drinking I'll probably ever have. My wife was granted a divorce and I didn't want it. About eight months ago my wife and I talked over my drinking and we decided that I should visit a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist asked me all the usual questions, I suppose. I didn't hold anything back. Finally he told me what I learned here without a fee, that I would always be an alcoholic. But his was a different answer. He told me I would have to take antabuse for a long time. I didn't know what antabuse is and he explained. I would take it every day and I would know that if I took a drink I would get deathly sick, collapse, vomit, and be rushed to a hospital. I would have to carry a card in my wallet. I thought it over and refused. My wife had a talk with him and he as much as told her to resign herself to living the rest of her life with a drunk.

"Well, my wife is young and good-looking and healthy. We have no children. She took a look at the long years of torture and humiliation and eventual poverty ahead and decided on a divorce. I didn't contest it. I didn't blame her at all. How could I, in all honesty? After the proceedings had started I worried more and more about my drinking. I controlled it for about two months and then went on a bust. Then I controlled it for three weeks and went on another bender. I wasn't working but I could find a job whenever I wanted it. Another month went by and one day I went back to the psychiatrist. I had heard a little about AA. I asked his opinion. He admitted that AA had gotten men sober and had helped them

maintain sobriety over long periods of time, but he said AA was not for me. Why? I asked him. Well, he said, it wasn't suited to my personality. It was a distorted way of living. I sat drinking in a dim bar after and thinking everything was over. Finally I thought, shall I be distorted drunk or distorted sober? At least if I was sober I would feel physically healthy. I went to the phone book and found the address of Thirty Huntington Avenue and there I went and asked for help.

"I've gotten help. I haven't had a drink for three months. Three months! I never thought I could go a day. And without medical help, too. Best of all, I'm happy without booze. I met my wife's lawyer a week ago. His mouth fell open because I was sober and my eyes were clear. That evening my wife, my ex-wife that is, telephoned me. I'm taking her to dinner next week. She's been calling me every day. I'm working again. Somehow I'm quieter. Maybe I've learned a little of that Easy Does It."

Ralph Hilton began to retch deeply with nothing, not even a fluid, rising from his stomach. He hurried from his seat. There was a vacant lot next to the building and he stood there leaning with one hand against the wall, sweating and retching and moaning between the retches until he remembered the bottle in Tom's car. The thought calmed his stomach. As he approached the car, Tom came out.

"That's an old familiar sound," Tom said. "You're lucky. I used to have the dry heaves in the cell in the morning. The cops knew I was a newspaperman so they would pick me up for my own safe-keeping."

Ralph opened the car door and sat inside to be nearer the bottle. He lowered the window. The night air was damp and cool. He shivered and put his hands between his knees to stop their shaking.

"I want to speak to a couple of the fellows and have a cup of coffee," Tom said. "I'll be only a few minutes. The bottle is under the seat there. Take one good shot and wait for me."

Back inside, where the meeting had ended, Tom got a doughnut and a cup of coffee and approached Tim, who was talking to a dentist known as Doc. Both of them had been sober without a drink for over eight years.

"I see you got a pigeon," Tim said. "How is he?"

Tom grinned. "Sick with the shakes and heaves. He called central service himself so I guess he needs it and thinks he wants it. But I'm trying to figure out how sick he is. A couple of times there during the meeting I thought he was going to fall out of his chair."

"How much has he been drinking a day?" Doc asked.

"Not much per day but he goes on benders and this one has been for almost a week now with whisky, wine, and beer all mixed up."

Doc shuddered. "Jesus, I never drank anything but whisky."

"Can he sweat it out tonight?" Tim asked.

"I don't know enough about him," Tom said. "He said he hasn't eaten anything for three days. Maybe he ought to be hospitalized."

"How is he fixed for dough?"

"His house looks good and there was a new car in the driveway."

"I don't like hospitals," Tim said. "It's too easy. The guy who has to sweat it out never forgets it."

"But supposing he don't," Tom said. "Maybe he tapers onto another drunk instead of stopping. He's going to be out of work a week anyway by the looks of him. There's two kids in the house, too, though he don't look like a violent man. The trouble is, you just can't tell how sick a drunk is. Not even a doctor can tell."

"Look, I've been thinking," Doc said. "You've got a bottle in the car. Drive him home. When you leave, give him the bottle. Tell him not to drink any of it unless he feels he's really going to die. Tell him to get through the night somehow without it. You're on vacation. In the morning stop in early. If the bottle is empty, talk about the hospital. If it's still as full, he's on his way to getting sober."

"Is he a wise guy?" Tim asked.

"No. The poor son of a bitch. I can tell he's wondering how in hell it ever happened to him."

"I wish you had met his wife," Tim said. "He didn't mention anything about her? Blame her or anything?"

"No, not a word about her. He just said his job worries him sometimes."

"Well, you better go out before he drinks himself to sleep."

### III

#### 1

THE day before Tom took Ralph Hilton to the Auburn meeting, he had driven Martin Gray to Greenleaf Hill for hospitalization. Martin did not seem to be in too bad shape. He had been dry for seven months and had then drunk for five days. He had asked Tom to

drive him there. Though he was shaking and feverish, Martin had packed a bag neatly and had even shaved himself, an unusual feat for a man who had been on a five-day bender. He had never been in a hospital before.

Martin Gray puzzled Tom. He had a kind of inner control that exercised itself even when he was drunk and shaken. He talked quietly, somewhat elaborately, often hesitantly. This manner, Tom knew, was not due to a loss for words, because Martin was fluent and had an extensive vocabulary. It was almost as if he were searching for a new set of words somewhat below the level of his comprehension. He had been a member of AA for over a year and this was the second time he had slipped. Generally he was liked by everyone but he had not developed the usual intimate friendships. He had spoken at meetings infrequently, using apologetically a language that did not seem quite in place.

The previous night Martin had rung Tom's door bell and had immediately confessed that he had been drinking heavily. Later on, Dick, a member from the Deering group to which Martin belonged, had dropped in.

Staring at Dick, Martin said, "You've got something I'd like to have, some sense of love and compassion, a wisdom you don't even know the words for. But it's there. It shines in you. And the hell of it is, I don't know how to get it or even what it really is."

Dick had looked at the floor.

"There's nothing I've got you haven't got, Martin," he answered. "It's just maybe that I've been sober a few more years. I've always admired you, the way you talk, the knowledge you have. Some of the things you've said have helped me understand myself better. You've helped others, too, though you may not know it. I'd like to have your words."

"Words," Martin said.

"Sometimes they help if you know the right ones."

After Dick had left, Tom asked Martin what he had meant.

"Dick's had a genuine religious experience," Martin answered. "You can see it in him and feel it, but how do you get it?"

Martin walked home from Tom's house, got in his car, and drove to a liquor store. A fifth seemed like a tremendous amount of whisky and a pint seemed much too little so he bought a pint and a half-pint.

"Why don't you buy a fifth? It's just as cheap," said the clerk.

"No," Martin answered. "To compromise is always a mark of wisdom, except at the supreme moment of love."

The next morning, with the pint and the half-pint gone, Martin called Tom to drive him to Greenleaf Hill. On the way Tom pulled up at the Red Barn.

"Well, here's your last chance," he said. "You might as well have one. You won't get anything up at the Hill."

Martin walked into the bar and ordered a bourbon, but his hand was shaking too much to raise the glass without spilling it. The bartender studied him.

"Put it in a tall glass," Martin said.

He gulped. The bartender grinned and said, "Does that make you feel like a new man?"

"Yes," Martin said. "Now put a double one in for the new man."

As he got back in the car, a warm happiness seemed to flood him. He lit a cigarette, knowing that now it would not make him sick, and he thought, It's done, it's all over, the change will come now somehow.

"Feel all right?" Tom asked.

"Perfectly. Somehow I'm happy."

"Maybe I'm taking you to the wrong hospital," Tom said.

"Oh, no. I'm rum-sick sure enough, but the shots have cured it for a time and I'm happy, you know. This is an ending. I can feel it. Oh, to hell with it. God, I feel dirty. I haven't had a bath for over a week. Everybody else looks so clean and happy. Even the fields and houses look happy. Even the homely girls look beautiful."

"You must have been a pip on some of your drunks."

"No. All I ever did was talk."

Martin closed his eyes and prayed. "God give me love to give and some small understanding."

"I guess I needed this," he said, opening his eyes.

"Now stay the whole six days," Tom said. "Don't itch to get out on the third or fourth day. Let the booze get out of you and your mind settle or you'll be wasting your money."

"All I ever wanted to do was rearrange the world a little," Martin said.

"So did Hitler," said Tom, turning the car up the steep road to the two houses of Greenleaf Hill.

Before he was put to bed Martin answered some questions coherently and signed his name legibly to the admittance form.

"You're quite pretty," he said to the receptionist, who was in fact quite plain and overgrown. He smiled gently at her and at the nurse who led him across a walk and turned him over to another nurse.

"Here's our new guest, Mr. Gray," the first nurse said.

"Really?" Martin said. "A guest? I think that's nice."

"Now just come in here. Get undressed and put on this johnny," said the second nurse. "You're the only patient in this ward today. Here's your bed."

"Thank you," Martin said. "You're very kind."

The nurse glanced sharply at him.

"You don't look bad," she said. "I was wondering which was the patient when you walked in. You should see some of the cases that come in."

"Perhaps I'll have that opportunity," said Martin. "But I'm an alcoholic, all right, with the innocence of a tot and the cunning of a tart. Would you mind stepping out till I get in bed? I promise you I am trying to hide neither a pint of whisky nor a pound of morphine."

The nurse returned with a doctor, who stared at Martin from behind thick lenses.

"Sit up," he said.

"This is Dr. Reisner," the nurse said.

"How do you do?" Martin said.

The doctor merely nodded and began wrapping Martin's arm to take his blood pressure. After this he listened briefly to his heart.

"All right. Give him the paraldehyde," he said to the nurse.

"Paraldehyde," Martin said. "Well——"

"What about it?" asked the doctor.

"It's just that I've often heard it mentioned and have never had the pleasure."

"Pleasure," the doctor echoed.

"This is fruit juice and this is the medicine," the nurse said, handing Martin two paper cups. "Take a little juice before and after."

When Martin took a sip of the paraldehyde, he gagged loudly. The doctor, who had turned away, wheeled around sharply.

"Did it burn your throat?" he asked.

"No. Only my soul," Martin said. "What an abominable smell and taste. Like distilled kerosene."

"Take the rest of it."

"Now," the nurse said, "you'll get a nice sleep. Lie down. Your friend will stop in to say good-bye."

The nurse and doctor left and a warm suffusion reached deeply into Martin, rose to his head and sunk downward, gratifyingly deep and comforting, as though he was warming his whole being at a gentle fire. This is an end, he thought. God grant me love to give

and some small understanding, some small love of which I can be worthy, some little knowledge to help others, some small peace, some corner in which to compose my soul.

"Well, how does it go?" Tom asked.

"Hello, Tom."

"What did you say to the nurse and doctor? They said you're a strange one."

"Alarmingly strange?"

"Go to sleep, boy. I'll stop and tell your wife I delivered you safely."

"If she's still there."

"Be good, boy."

"Thank you, Tom. I'm sorry I've been a nuisance."

Martin shivered and pulled the bed clothes up to his chin. He closed his eyes and as Tom left he began to weep at the pity of it all, the pity warm and gentle as a summer rain, the pity of the fall flowers and the white starched uniforms. He climbed out of bed, paraldehyde and all, and knelt, almost falling flat on the floor, to pray once more for a small love and some modicum of wisdom. The tears flowed gently and he rose once more, swaying and grasping at the high guard of the bed, vaulting over quite lightly but rather jumbled and seventy per cent naked as the nurse rushed in.

"Mr. Gray! Mr. Gray! You must not get up! You must stay in bed. You'll hurt yourself. Now go to sleep."

"Ah, the pity of it, nurse," Martin said. "Just a bowl of cherries, is all."

"You alkys," said the nurse. "What goes on in those minds of yours? You're all the same and all different."

"Mr. Kurtz, he dead," Martin said. "And a rain of tears falls on a continent. What goes on is the conception and ultimate miscarriage of a dream, nurse. Our lives are fragmentary, nurse. We are alchemists searching for a catalytic agent to change talent into genius, happiness into ecstasy, a house into a palace. We search tragically for an ultimate."

"Maybe the paraldehyde will work," said the nurse.

"In us the astral mechanics forgot the reduction gears."

"At least, at least," the nurse agreed.

"Oh lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again."

"Go to sleep now. That stuff should knock you out."

"For you, nurse, the bottle is half filled. For us, nurse, the bottle is half empty. Is there something else you wish to know?"

"Yes. What in hell is keeping you awake?"

"‘I am restless. I am athirst for faraway things. My soul goes out in longing to touch the skirt of the dim distance. O great beyond! O keen call of thy flute! I forget, I ever forget, that I am bound to this spot forevermore.’”

The nurse shook her head and walked out of the ward, closing the door behind her, closing the door on the dim room and the dimly roving mind of Martin as he lay there on his back with his tear-dampened nose pointed upward as if scenting the God he longed for, and shaking now and then from a spasm caused by the potations he had imbibed for hope and from despair, because of pity turned to irony, and because there yet remained in him a small untouched spot which had never been violated nor yet nurtured, a small pure spot of which he had been afraid as one is of cancer, that it would spread somehow and destroy the colour and brightness of life.

## 2

Martin did not react normally to the paraldehyde. Two hours after falling asleep he awoke in the unlighted room. All the shades were drawn. Some weak daylight drifted in from the half-opened door to the lobby. An old bent woman was standing at the foot of his bed. Her grey hair was tied behind her head with a stringy ribbon and she wore a dirty grey sweater. Martin stared at her and the old woman stared back. Martin closed his eyes again. His eyes were burning and he was damp with a cold sweat, but inwardly he was calm. His mind was almost completely empty. He did not think, ‘This is a hospital, or, I’m sick. He listened to a great stillness. When he opened his eyes once more the old woman was still staring at him.

“What is it, dear? What is it?” she asked.

It isn’t night, Martin thought.

“Would you like the shade up? Would you like the shade down?” asked the old woman.

“It is a matter of complete indifference to me,” Martin said wearily, closing his eyes once more.

He heard the old woman raise the shade at the foot of his bed, and light fell beyond his closed lids.

It is sunlight, he thought.

“Would you like it up? Would you like it down?”

“Whatever suits your taste,” said Martin.

“What is it, dear? Have you seen the girls?”



"No," Martin said.

"I think up is nice. Oh, those girls!"

Martin kept his eyes closed and now he heard a quavering flute from a great distance and he listened intently to connect the notes into a melody, but for several measures the notes were separate sounds until the tempo quickened and ceased to waver and he recognized from far back in his episodic life, from further than all the rooms he had inhabited, from beyond the mountainous seasons ranged in serried time, the tune of an old hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee." The old woman said nothing until the flute achieved silence.

Then she said, "Oh, those girls! Have you seen Emily? Have you seen Rose? Why do they not come upstairs? Girls, girls!"

We are on the ground floor, Martin thought. He opened his eyes and smiled gently at the old woman who was staring again at him.

"Do not be disturbed about them," he said.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "Would you like the shade up? Would you like the shade down?"

Briefly, as the shade was up, a corner of sunlight pierced the room and beyond the window Martin saw some orange marigolds against a low grey wall. But the room was quickly dark again, the shutter closed, the picture etched on his negative mind.

"Sarah, Sarah! What are you doing in here? Shame on you, in a man's room. How did you get downstairs?" the nurse exclaimed, entering in a white flurry and a mild fury.

To what strange world am I reborn? Martin thought.

"Scoot now, Sarah. Go back up to your room. You're awake, Mr. Gray? You're supposed to sleep at least four hours, till it's time for the next shot."

"I'm sorry if I have disturbed the time schedule of your therapy," Martin said. "I did not will myself awake. I cannot will myself to sleep."

"How are you feeling?"

"Cold and hot. Still and tremulous. I'm hungry."

"Hungry?" the nurse exclaimed. "Hungry? Nobody eats the first twenty-four hours. Some of them can't hold food for days. Anyway, you are not allowed food the first twenty-four hours. Paraldehyde usually keeps them knocked out for at least a day and a night. Why, I've seen many of them sleep for forty-eight hours."

"Twenty-four, forty-eight, five," Martin said, like a weary quarter back.

"What's the five?"

"I drank for five days. I did not eat very much. Undoubtedly I am suffering from malnutrition, anæmia, dysphoria, and many other related ailments. I'm hungry."

"Well," the nurse said, "I'll get you a glass of milk. But I won't be happy if you throw it."

"I promise to share your misery," Martin said, closing his eyes. And now he began to shake, various nerves and tendons seeming to have entirely independent lives of their own. He felt feverish. He remembered suddenly waking up from the blackout, lying on the front seat of his car, shivering, feeling in the darkness for the bottle which was somewhere, under the seat, on the seat, in the glove compartment, feeling blindly all around until there it was, and raising it high as he lay back flatly to see it against the night sky, and the top was missing, it must have spilled, and there could not be much left, possibly four ounces, and lowering his arm now as his mouth sought obscenely, passionately, the relief from this devastating, paralytic grasp, and the warm flow now of the fluid, the unnamed, which flowed more quickly to his brain than to his stomach, spreading warm, spreading warm as his arm fell slowly back to the floor of the car and he was oh, so gratefully unconscious once more, with the bottle lying there on the floor, a quarter ounce, a corner, a few drops left to rise and torment, as would the new sun, another day for him.

The nurse returned with the pure white milk.

"You know," she said. "There is something about you. I don't believe you are an alcoholic at all."

Martin lifted himself on one elbow without replying. He smiled as he took the glass. The cold milk felt new as he drank it, like the first snow in November in childhood, cooling the uplifted flushed face. He handed the glass back.

"Thank you," he said, but almost with the period he heaved up and the milk came through his mouth and nose with some burning, gaseous fluid from the vile depths of his being, and some of the fluid wetting the nurse's uniform as she stepped backward with a curse that was not at all like the clean white nylon she wore.

Martin leaned his head on the high guard of the bed, gasping and sweating and running the back of his hand across his mouth and chin.

"It was not my stomach but my memory that revolted," Martin said.

"You threw it!" said the nurse.

"I am an alcoholic," Martin said. "I am a sick, slobbering

alcoholic with many words to hide my festering soul and cloak the fears of a faithless mind. Oh, my poor, poor body that was once so strong, that I've dragged and degraded about and around till it's weary, weary, like a horse too long in harness."

"You and your goddam words," said the nurse.

When Martin awoke from his second shot of paraldehyde, another woman was standing at the foot of his bed. She was dressed in white without a cap on her black hair that was combed upward in a tower, very black, as though it might be dyed. She wore glasses without rims and looked somehow authoritative, an owner or supervisor perhaps. She smiled when Martin looked at her.

"I'm Sadie of the Rockingham group," she said softly.

"You're an alcoholic?" Martin asked.

"Sure," she said. "Like you."

"Why are you here?"

"I work here. I'm the cleaning woman. I waited till you woke up."

Martin began to weep softly because of her kindness and because he knew that she would not condemn this weakness. Sadie walked up from the foot of the bed and put her hand on his head, smoothing his hair.

"It hurts?" she said. "I've been like you, lying there."

"It's just that I'm so ashamed," Martin said. "Because of my own group and everyone I know. My wife told me last night she is leaving."

"That's too bad."

"In tragic life no villain need be. Alcoholic spins the plot."

"I don't know what you mean," Sadie said.

"I'm sorry."

"Do you want a smoke? You can't smoke unless someone is with you."

"No. It might make me sicker. Am I the only alcoholic here?"

"There's only Denny. But he's been here for two months."

"Two months! Tell me about him."

"He's a mechanic who owned a small garage and lived alone in a room. He's a nice fellow, but sometimes—you know." Sadie shrugged and tapped her forehead. "He was drinking heavy, heavy, for two years. Whisky. Not eating hardly. Nobody knew, you know. His arms and legs are like sticks. Only his head is the right size. An AA guy found out he drank a lot and went to his room one night after the garage was closed for two days. Denny was un-

conscious on the floor and, all around him and under the mattress was money. All over, you know. Like leaves the dollars were. Well, the AA guy called the police. A complete basket case he was. They scooped him up and brought him here. The AA guy and the cop counted the money. How much do you think?"

"Five hundred dollars?" Martin said.

"Six thousand!" said Sadie. "It's terrible, terrible."

"The money?" Martin asked.

"The money? No. He has diabetes and heart trouble. He can't walk alone. Two years, imagine! Without eating hardly. The poor man, the poor man. He shouldn't be here. There's no more booze in him. They keep him here to get the money. He should be in a regular hospital."

"When was your last drink, Sadie?"

"Seven months ago. I spoke twice. Was I nervous, was I nervous! Do you speak?"

"Yes, I did several times, Sadie. But I never liked to, really. It's like speaking in a strange language, especially if one speaks of God. I am not a good speaker, Sadie, not even by AA standards. I know too many words, and words have little feet. They pick you up and run away with you. Your mind, that is."

"You still have an hour before the next paraldehyde, Martin. Do you want some fruit juice?"

"I'm hungry. What I'd like is a cup of coffee and a sandwich."

"I'll get it for you."

"What will the nurse say?"

"They don't know how an alcoholic feels. You need to eat. If she comes, I'll make believe it's mine."

But when Sadie came back, Martin was asleep again. She put the coffee and sandwich on his table and sat down in a straight-back chair and folded her hands, sitting there in the dimness waiting for her brother alcoholic to awaken again.

### 3

Martin awoke from his third shot of paraldehyde at ten o'clock that night. His throat was dry. He was twisting back and forth in the bed. The covers were tangled about his feet. He felt ashamed because his genitals were exposed and hastily he pulled the covers up. At the foot of his bed he saw, in the dim light entering from the lobby, an old man who was tied with towels to a chair. A long

towel was fastened across the back of his neck, then under his armpits and tied behind the chair so that his hands were free. The old man was earnestly trying to thread a needle, though he had no needle nor any thread.

"Hello there," Martin said.

"Ha," the old man answered.

"What is your name?" Martin asked.

But the old man did not answer this question.

A nurse came in swiftly and cried, "Ah, Mr. Gray, you're awake! Did you sleep good, then?"

"I slept good but not well," Martin answered. "You're not the same nurse."

"No. They call me Scottie because of my accent. But really I'm from Yorkshire. Did old Tom bother you?"

"Oh, no. Can I smoke?"

"Surely. I'll get a cigarette and stay with you."

When the nurse left, old Tom looked up.

"They ought to bulldoze that," he said.

Martin laughed. "Oh, no," he said. "She looks like a very good nurse."

Tom began threading his needle again, first carefully wetting the thread between his lips. Scottie returned and lit a cigarette for Martin, placing an ash tray on the bed table.

"I like alcoholic patients," Scottie said. "They're always courteous and helpful unless they are out of their minds. Some of them though try to get out if they've been brought in against their wills."

"I suppose I would, too," Martin said. "They are courteous because of the load of guilt they carry. God, how many times have I carried the hump of humiliation like a mangy camel across the burning sands of shame?"

"You talk like an actor, Mr. Gray."

"I'll say the obvious thing, Scottie. All the world's a stage. But with us it is more tragic. We are always trying to rewrite the play."

"Ah, that's Shakespeare, now."

"Tell me, is the whole world sobering up? Eight beds for alcoholics and I'm the only patient."

"Oh, there will be more. Somehow they seem to come in here in bunches. They get ripe like bananas, I think." Scottie giggled. "Nobody's here and all of a sudden the room is full with several women in the other ward."

"Women," Martin said. "Tell me, Scottie, what do you think of alcohol and sex?"

"Oh, Mr. Gray! I like the one not at all and the other in moderation."

"Indeed? I won't ask for clarification. But that's not what I meant. What I meant is, is there a relation between the two as a problem? It is something that alcoholics are loath to discuss even among themselves."

"It is now time for your paraldehyde."

"What a fitting period," Martin said.

When the nurse left the ward, Martin scrambled hastily over the high side of the bed. He staggered and clutched the rails and let himself down on his knees.

"God give me love to give and some small understanding," he prayed, and climbed quickly back for fear that the nurse would be upset to know he had been out of bed.

"This is your last shot," the nurse said, returning. "In the morning you start on vitamins and other medication. I hope you sleep all right. I've got to get old Tom off to bed. Come on, Tom, old boy."

"Good night, Scottie. Good night, Tom," Martin said.

But he did not fall asleep immediately. When he closed his eyes, he saw the marigolds against the grey stone wall, clear in the bright sun, and peculiarly, the flute began to play again in the same manner, faltering and then gaining regular sequence until he recognized a hymn again, not the same one—now "The Old Rugged Cross." He opened his eyes and the marigolds disappeared but the flute was indeed playing, away off somewhere in the large house. He closed his eyes, saw the flowers again, and thought, God dwells in the orange marigolds against the grey stone wall.

When he awoke in the morning Martin knew that it was late and that the big shakes had left him and that now he would have to bear only the lesser spasms, the depression, the sudden fears, the remorse, and the inward torture of returning memory. The flute began to play and he recognized immediately the melody of "The Red River Valley." I must be getting better, he thought. He was very hungry. He yawned and felt happy for some minutes.

He raised up on one elbow and saw a man with a very high colour and a moustache, rather overgrown, in the bed next to him. The man began to thrash about violently, then lay still, then heaved upward suddenly, parallel to the bed, as though possessing powers of levitation. Martin stared, as if at his other self there in the other bed, and began almost to weep, wanting to reach out and still that agonizing unconsciousness. "God help him, God help him," he muttered, and then fell back himself, thinking, Oh what, oh what?

Oh, how can I ever know where self-pity ends and pity begins? He raised up again and then he noticed that one of the bed's guards was down and even as he did, the other patient jerked again and hung for a moment on the edge of the mattress before falling from the high bed to the floor. Martin climbed over his own high guard and when his feet touched the floor, fell beside the man. The man had turned over and was pushing himself up weakly.

"What is it, for Christ's sake?" asked the man.

"Come on, back in bed with you," Martin said. "It was just a little slip."

The man, having reached his hands and knees, began trembling rapidly and sweating. Martin held him upright on his knees and wiped his face with the sleeve of his johnny.

"What a rude awakening," he said. "You were really leaping there."

And now the nurse made her entrance, another nurse yet, this one about sixty years of age, with grey hair and glasses, a veteran for sure, looking quite angry at the sight of the two alcoholics kneeling there in an embrace.

"What are you doing, what are you doing?" she cried. "Get in bed there, the two of you. Get in bed."

"It is what we are attempting to do," Martin said.

"This will go on your chart," the nurse said.

"Will it cost me any more?" Martin asked. "I am trying to help him."

He stood and with the nurse's help lifted the hardly conscious man to his feet.

"The blind can't help the blind," said the nurse.

"Oh, you're quite wrong, though it's a poor time to argue the matter," Martin answered.

The nurse pushed the upper half of the man's body over on the bed and neatly flipped his buttocks and legs up. Then she raised the guard. Martin climbed back in bed.

"Now," said the nurse, turning to him, "you are to stay there."

"This man fell out of bed and I was trying to help him back," Martin said.

"You'll mind your own business," said the nurse. "If anything happens you can call."

Martin was silent a moment, then he said, "Nurse, I may be an alcoholic, or rather, I should say I am, but I have no intention of being the object of your expressed contempt or anger. Especially so when this misfortune was caused by your carelessness in neglect-

ing the guard. The man might have been seriously hurt. I'll be here for some time and I hope we may have, if not affection, at least some mutual respect for each other."

"Oh, my God," said the nurse. "Listen to that. Is your bed clean?"

"Clean?" Martin asked.

"Have you dirtied it?"

Martin stared at the nurse. "It won't work, nurse," he said. "You see, I am inured to humiliation. But if such a thing should happen I shall certainly call on one so eminently qualified for the job as yourself."

And suddenly the old nurse began to laugh heartily.

"By God, you can really hand it out, can't you?" she said. "You're quite a boy."

Martin grinned at her.

"When did this baby arrive?" he asked.

"About an hour ago," she said. "Since then another woman has come in, so you can see I've been kind of busy."

"That's fine," Martin said. "I thought I might be alone. What are their names?"

"This one's named Hilton. One of the women is a Mrs. Johnson, a stranger. The other is Mrs. Reece, Abbie Reece, a repeater. She's here for the fourth time. I wouldn't be surprised if it's her fourth name."

"Four times? The poor woman. She must have some talent if it's her fourth name."

"She has scars on her wrists which appeared between her second and third trip here. Evidently she can't do a good job even at that. I wouldn't waste much sympathy on her. She's been around, that one."

"Around what?" Martin asked innocently.

"The maypole," said the nurse.

"You know what the maypole was originally a symbol of, don't you?" Martin asked.

"I don't," said the nurse. "But whatever it is, she's been around it."

"Well, it's an old question," Martin said. "Who is more deserving of love and compassion and help, the sinner or the saint? It is quite easy to love the good and the strong but who will love the wicked and the depraved?"

"You got your own troubles if you are like all alcoholics. Don't get tangled up in others. Here's your medication."



She handed Martin a paper cup in which were four pills and a capsule.

"A pharmacopœia," he said. "Enough to induce pharmacomania."

"It's the treatment," the nurse said. "You get lunch today. There's another couple, a husband and wife, coming in sometime if they don't get arrested for drunken driving on the way. The love birds, David and Helen. They spent their honeymoon here, imagine! But they were here twice before their honeymoon. The only thing new at the wedding was the cake. Oh, you'll have company, all right, when all of them start roaming around in their bathrobes."

"I suppose I'm rather selfish, but I'm glad they'll all be here," Martin said. "I have been hearing a flute, nurse."

"Oh, that's old Dr. Byrne upstairs. He's eighty-five."

"What else is he suffering from?"

"Well, believe it or not, he was brought in as an alcoholic. Also, he was taking pills."

#### 4

It was two o'clock the following afternoon when the Le Grandes arrived at Greenleaf Hill. They parked the car in the proper space and Helen asked David to sign in and negotiate. They were immensely relieved and felt happy and safe for the moment.

"I'll be in the rumpus room," Helen said.

The rumpus room was the cellar beneath the alcoholic ward. Helen wanted to see Sadie. She was clutching her toothbrush, rather proudly, and her jacket was buttoned up over the wine stains on her white blouse. Sadie was having a cup of coffee at one of the formica-topped tables.

"Ah, you got here," Sadie said. "We heard yesterday you were on the way. Jesus, you look awful."

"I got my toothbrush. That's pretty good."

"Well, you weren't carried in."

Helen shook and looked furtively back and forth. She hadn't had a drink for two hours.

"Will it take long to get Dr. Reisner? I need the pracky. God, I never thought we'd really make it."

"He should be here soon."

The rumpus room was used as the dining-room for the alcoholics and as a meeting place by a local group of Alcoholics Anonymous.

At one end of the room the blue and gold banners were hanging. Helen looked at them and sundered, feeling a sense of guilt.

At that moment Martin came down the stairs. He was wearing a dark blue tailored robe, not one of the hospital's, and he was slightly grey and very sober looking. The bathrobe amazed her because no one ever arrived at the Hill with his own things, or at least very seldom.

"Hello, Sadie," he said. "Can I join you?"

"Sure," Sadie said. "This is Helen Le Grande. She's going to be a guest."

"Yes, I've heard," he said.

"This is Mr. Gray," Sadie said.

"Martin. I won't ask you how you are, Helen. You look as if you're prepared to battle the world with a toothbrush."

"It's my luggage," Helen said.

On a counter was an electric coffee percolator. Martin poured himself a cup and looked around.

"Would you like a cup, Helen?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, though she did not really want it. She wanted the paralytic badly but she knew that they would not put her to bed until the doctor had been located and was on his way. She wondered if David was having trouble about the money. Somehow they had spent forty-five of the sixty dollars. But there was the car for surety, poor as it was.

"It's my first day up," Martin said. "I've had a shave, you see, and a shower and three meals. Then I was dry for seven months and went on only a five-day bender. So I guess I'm not in bad shape. I'm glad you're here. My cigarettes are upstairs."

When he left Helen said to Sadie, "What's up with him?"

"I don't know," Sadie said. "We never had an alcoholic like him here. He's strange."

"You don't mean queer?" Helen asked.

"Oh, no. He's married and has a son. Me, I don't know. I don't know what he's talking about sometimes. But you know, he's gentle and kind some way. He looks into me and sometimes I feel happy and sometimes sad."

"Has he been to AA?"

"Yes," Sadie said.

"Oh, well," Helen said. "He's an alcoholic then."

Upstairs in the men's ward, David was undressing, angry despite all his shakes and fears because he had tried to hide his car keys under the mattress and the nurse had seen him and had taken the

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keys to the office. He had been scheming to stay three days and then somehow get his and Helen's clothes and slip out. Martin entered the ward.

"Hi," David said.

"How do you feel?" Martin asked.

"Like I've played seventy-two holes in the mud."

"You're a golfer?"

"I used to be in prep school."

He slipped his johnny on and got in bed.

"Want a smoke?" Martin asked.

"Sure, if I can hold it."

"You are shaking," Martin said. "Damn near all of you."

He lit a cigarette and passed it to David.

"It's my left side that shakes most. I've only got one lung. The other's collapsed. I shake on that side."

"Was that your wife I met downstairs in what is ridiculously called the rumpus room?"

"Yes it was. And we love each other very much."

"Sure, I know you do," Martin said gently. "But don't be belligerent about it. What are you so angry about?"

David bowed his head, sitting there on the bed, his hand with the cigarette trembling rapidly and his jaw set to one side to stop its quivering.

"I don't know," he said. "When I drink, when I'm this way, I lose all my courage. I'm afraid of everything. I just want to hide. I'm afraid of everything, you understand? I'm afraid to walk or talk or see people. I'm afraid of policemen even if I've done nothing."

"Yes?" Martin said. "And I'm afraid many times, too, maybe of things different from the things that frighten you, but afraid anyway."

"Forget it. Who's the guy next to me?"

"His name is Ralph Hilton. He's sleeping nicely now. You should have seen his acrobatics the first few hours. They were really amazing."

"The pracky will quiet me. Where are you sleeping?"

"Oh, I'm in a plush room now. A radio and a leather chair. Is pracky your pet name for paraldehyde? It doesn't seem quite right that such a formidable medicine should be called by such a cute name."

"Go to hell," David said.

"I've been there," said Martin. "Well, I've got to go along. I hope you get a fine sleep. The flute is a real one if you hear it."

"I know," David said. "I've heard it before."

As Martin left, Dr. Reisner came in and said to David, "What, you here again?"

The nurse entered the rumpus room and greeted Helen.

"All right," she said. "The bed's ready and the doctor is treating your husband. Will you come this way?"

"Thank God," Helen said. "I'll see you, Sadie."

"You poor dear," Sadie said.

In the women's ward Helen saw that Abbie Reece and Mrs. Johnson were asleep. She took off her shoes and went into the bathroom to brush her teeth. The nurse laughed.

"You should take care of the rest of you like that," she said.

When Helen undressed, the nurse gathered her clothes.

"Get in bed. The doctor's coming."

"You here again?" Dr. Reisner said.

"It's your charming personality that draws me."

"Why don't you get pregnant instead?" the doctor asked.

"All the good abortionists are in jail."

The doctor listened to her heart and took her blood pressure, and the nurse, who had gone into a small dispensary off the ward, came back with the two paper cups. Tears were on Helen's cheeks.

"A mother," she said.

"What did you say?" asked the doctor.

"Nothing," Helen said. "Well, here goes. First one in three months."

She swallowed the paraldehyde with a grimace. The nurse left and there was a great stillness. She remained sitting up, waiting for the paraldehyde to work. Martin wandered in.

"Hello," he said. "You were gone when I came back with the cigarettes. Do you want one now?"

"No. I'm waiting for the paraldehyde to work. I wanted to kiss Davey good night."

"Can you walk?"

"Oh, sure, I never stagger."

"Well, get behind me. The nurse is in the office."

Helen got up and stood behind Martin. He seemed tremendously tall and broad. He peeked into the lobby and then turned quickly and held her as she skipped around into the men's ward. The ward was very dim and Martin led her to David's bed.

"Davey?" she said.

"Hi, Kid."

"I came to kiss you good night."

David pushed himself up and kissed her.

"Sleep," she said.

"You, too."

She started back and David watched her, the hospital johnny coming halfway down her thighs, her feet bare, watched her peeking out into the lobby before she skipped out of sight.

Helen saw Martin as he left the men's ward, crossing the lobby.

"Hey!" she called, feeling happy drunk on the paraldehyde and knowing she would have a few minutes before it knocked her out. "I'll have the smoke now."

Martin entered the ward, lit a cigarette for her, and sat on the bed. Helen was propped up.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"That's a question alcoholics are always asking," Martin said. "We're always out of our orbits. Where am I? What time is it? About three, I guess."

"In the afternoon. Funny, when I'm this way it always seems night time. If it's like always, I'll wake up at six o'clock and lie there shaking for the next shot. Will you come in and talk to me if I'm alone and look in on Davey for me?"

"Of course," Martin said.

He had a faint smile and was staring into her eyes and she would have blushed some seven years before.

"Do you have any children?" he asked.

"A boy about ten. Not by Davey. By my other husband."

"You're divorced?"

He was staring intently but somehow kindly and she began to feel a little naked and then resentful. She felt a need to shock him. He seemed too good.

"Oh, no. He was killed on a ship in the Pacific."

"Yes?" Martin said. "And were you broken up?"

"I was relieved. Oh, God, how lucky I was. It was funny, you know. This aunt who brought me up is very religious as far as forms are concerned. I was dependent on her, you see, the baby having just come, and I was still weak and I couldn't stay with my mother because she hates me and I wanted to get a job. So she had me say this novena for his safety and I kept it faithfully. Then one day she walked into my room and stared at me and she said, 'I guess your prayers were answered.' She handed me a telegram saying that he had been killed."

Martin smiled and held out the tray for her ashes.

"You had to marry him then?"

"Yes. I was in the Waves. I got caught."

She arranged her pillows and pulled the covers to her chin.

"Have a good sleep," Martin said, snapping out the bed lamp. He stooped over and kissed her forehead.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "Because you look so bloody helpless, I guess."

"I could have sweated this one out," she said. "It was Davey who started this time. I could have sweated it out if he could have."

"And that's why you're here, really?"

"No, this was the easy way out. I'm not brave."

"None of us are."

She closed her eyes and heard him walk quietly away, and now the paraldehyde really began to work, loosening her limbs and warmly blotting her mind.

## IV

Tom had stopped his car in front of Ralph Hilton's house. There was a light on in the living-room. Ralph had talked for a while as if loath to enter his home.

"Remember, try to get through the night without a drink," Tom said. "Give me a ring in the morning, or if you get feeling too desperate give me a ring during the night. It's time, you see, that's important. Not all of time, just the twenty-four hours."

"I'll make it," Ralph said. "I just can't go on this way. I've had enough."

He got out of the car and walked to his front door. His wife, Anne, was lying curled up on the sofa that was placed midway along one wall. The television was on. Ralph sat down in a chair immediately inside the front door without removing his topcoat. His wife turned her head to stare briefly at him and then watched the programme again without speaking. The programme was a noisy crime episode working to a climax.

Ralph sat waiting for a break in the sound with a feeling of hopelessness settling over him, a hopelessness caused by the lack of faith he knew his wife would have, a hopelessness caused by his



knowledge that her lack of faith was justified and that it would take months before any semblance of normal living could be achieved, if indeed it could ever be achieved. Anne, he knew, considered his drinking as a personal affront, as a lack of love for her and the children, as a moral weakness, as cowardice, as a pleasure in which he deliberately indulged. She had no understanding of the compulsive quality of it. Worse than this she had a suspicion that was almost a conviction that his drinking was accompanied by infidelity. Several times Ralph had been driven almost insane trying to allay these unjustified suspicions.

He got up and went into the kitchen and drank a glass of water. When he returned to the living-room, the programme was finished. Anne was lighting a cigarette.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?" she demanded.

Immediately he became on guard and small hackles of resentment began rising. He could feel the pint bottle in his topcoat pocket and for an instant he had an impulse to put it on the coffee table before the sofa, but then the mountainous task of explaining the bottle and facing Anne's incredulity overcame it. She would think he was once more weaving some monstrous fabrication. If he could remember all the words, expose the bottle, explain as the men had, have their sincerity and serenity—but it was impossible.

"I think maybe I've found something," he said slowly.

"I hope it's better than I've found these last five years," his wife answered.

Instead of trying now to explain, he found himself desperately on the defensive. He sat clasping and unclasping his hands with his head bowed, not looking at his wife, thinking of the speaker who had had the D.T.'s, of Tom, who had been jailed so often and who still had unpaid debts after six years of sobriety, of other snatches of talk he had heard that indicated he had not reached such a disastrous state as others had.

"Well, I found out I'm a drunk," he said. "I'm an alcoholic, all right. I know that now. I'd like to do something about it now that I know, now that I admit it. But I found out, too, that I haven't done so badly even so. I've never been locked up or sent to a hospital or been arrested. I didn't pile up debts. I haven't been drunk in public so that anyone could take offence. We have a fairly decent home, a summer cottage, a car, a bank account. I haven't lost my driver's licence. I've never been fired from a job. Maybe I could start now, again, with all this so that I wouldn't have to go any further."

"You haven't done this or that, have you?" she said. "Who's been handling the money? Who's been running the home? You? If you were running things, where would we be?"

"But don't I earn the money?" he asked. "Don't I give you my pay? Isn't that anything? Have you ever been really in want for anything reasonable?"

"Yes, you turn over the money and then steal it back out of my bag."

"In the name of Jesus. I don't steal it. It's money I've earned. And I take only a dollar or so to buy cheap wine."

"You don't buy cheap wine when you're away from home."

"But that isn't my pay. That's expense money for my sales trips."

"You wouldn't think of saving a little of it and bringing it home, would you? No, you have to eat steak and drink whisky in the hotels. And God knows what else you buy, what running around you're doing."

"Good God, I'm home every night except for two nights a month on the road. How can I be running around?"

"I'm the one who has kept things together," she said. "Not you. Always you. Always I'm supposed to worry how you feel."

"If you do, it is your own security you are really worrying about, not me," he said. "Oh, to hell with it! Do you hear? I thought tonight I could come home and maybe you would believe me and maybe something new would happen. But it won't. It's the same old rat race. Either we argue or we both freeze up. I'm sick to hell of it."

He took the bottle from his pocket, unscrewed the top, and took a defiant gulp in front of her, to end it, to prove finally that he was done, it was over, and to hell with it, anyway.

"You didn't have any money," she said. "Where did you get that bottle?"

"It was the test," he said. "You see? I wasn't going to take a drink, just have it there in case I got too bad. It was a test and now I've failed. And so have you. If you had been in bed, if only I could have gone up to sleep, just sleep—it isn't much to ask because you've got the home and everything, it isn't my home, I just sleep here—if I could have gone up and slept."

"Oh, go to bed," his wife said. "You're drunk. So they bought you a bottle to get sober with. A fine bunch."

"Yes, they are," Ralph said, taking off his coat and leaving it in the chair. "They know, you see. They know me like you don't after

twenty years. And I'll get sober and stay sober no matter what happens, without your help."

"It's the whisky talking," she said. "You were always so sure of getting sober when you're drunk."

"All right, all right," he said.

"What are you doing with the bottle?"

"I'm taking it to bed, I'll put a nipple on it and drink it slow. See? There it is, a bottle of whisky not hidden. The Big Pay-off and Heart-line and Life Can Be Beautiful, all in a bottle." He became almost incoherent.

On the way upstairs he thought, if I drink the whole pint, that will be more than a quart in twelve hours.

About two o'clock Ralph awoke lying on his back. When he opened his eyes he saw the stars and his mind flurried to locate himself. He felt as if he were afire and he wanted only to be unconscious again as rapidly as possible. He opened the bottle and drank. Twice more he awoke and each time the first thought that came to him was, I won't get off this one, this one finishes me. Then the drink knocked him out once more. When he awoke at half-past six, the bottle was empty and he became somewhat terrified. He got up and went to the bathroom and splashed water on his face. Then he combed his hair. He sat on his bed a few moments, got up and looked out at the grey street. Some leaves were lying colourlessly on the lawn. Alternately he was numb and quivering. He opened his bureau drawers and pawed the clothes about, even though he was certain no bottle was hidden there. He looked with the same hopelessness at the closet shelf. He picked up his coat and began searching in his pockets. He heard his two small daughters stirring in their room and he crossed the hall and opened their door.

"Now don't get up yet," he said. "Keep your door shut."

They stared without answering. Back in his own room he found the paper with the telephone number, but as he started to go downstairs, his wife appeared.

"What are you doing this early?" she whispered. "Where are you going?"

"Will you leave me alone?" he said in a fierce whisper. "Will you leave me alone?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing, nothing," he said.

"Did you drink all that whisky?"

"In the name of God, will you leave me alone?"

He went downstairs and for a few moments walked back and forth in the living-room, looking out at the deserted street, at the day he dreaded, at the life he didn't want, then straightening the sofa scarf, putting a book back in its case, walking, walking, and at last, as if remembering suddenly, grabbing desperately at the phone. It seemed to ring a long time before anyone answered. Finally he heard Tom say hello.

"Ralph Hilton," he said. "I guess I didn't make it."

"Well, take it easy, boy," Tom said. "Did you sleep at all?"

"Off and on between drinks. Can you come over?"

"Sure. I'll get dressed right away. Just take it easy. Listen, put on a pot of coffee and we can talk it over."

"Ail right."

"Leave the front door unlocked so I can come right in. There's no point in arousing the neighbour's curiosity."

Ralph took the latch off the front door and went into the kitchen and got the coffee ready.

He opened a cupboard and searched among the bottles and cans of spices and condiments. He took out a bottle and stared at the label, which read Pure Vanilla Extract. He could not read the smaller lettering without his glasses and they were upstairs. He started for the stairs, then hesitated and entered the living-room, turned on a floor lamp by the sofa, sat down, and began holding the bottle at various lengths, squinting, then rubbing his eyes and squinting again. He found the word *alcohol*, saw a figure that was either a 3 or an 8 with a zero after it and a per cent sign. And now it seemed terribly important to find out whether the extract was 30 per cent or 80 per cent. If it was 80 there could not be much in it that might be poisonous or would make him sick. Because of his wife and children he was afraid to go upstairs for his glasses. He thought frantically and remembered a paper cutter that was in the desk. It had a magnifying glass set in one end. He found it quickly. He returned to the lamp by the sofa. The 80 per cent loomed large and reassuring. Without hesitation he raised the bottle and drank half its contents. As he lowered it he heard Tom coming up the walk. Quickly he screwed on the cap, put the bottle under the sofa, and went to the door.

"Hi," Tom said softly, stepping in. He gave a quick shrewd glance at Ralph.

"Come in the kitchen," Ralph said. "The coffee's ready."

Tom sat down and stirred his coffee slowly. Ralph raised his cup with both hands but he couldn't hold the cup to his lips without

spilling it. He set it down and leaned over, sucking the hot liquid and pressing his hands between his knees.

"Have you been able to sweat out a drunk other times?" Tom asked.

"Not lately. I've had to taper off. I don't know. I've never been this bad before. I don't know how I'm going to get off this one. I used to be able to eat a little, now even the thought makes me sick."

"Well, there's other ways," Tom said softly.

"What other ways?"

"Well, places you can go to get dried out. Sobered up, that is."

"Oh hell, I couldn't go to a place like that."

"Wait a minute now," Tom said. "Easy does it. I've been in one. The only thing is, some of the places make it so easy a man might want to try it again."

"Oh God, no!" Ralph said. "Not if you really got off it. Where were you?"

"A place called Callahan's Health Farm. They taper you off there. You have your own jug with your name on it. There's only men. The food's good. You get medication. But I don't go much for the tapering off because you leave still with the taste for booze. Well, there's Greenleaf Hill. The food's not so good but it is adequate and healthy. You'll get paraldehyde, which is like a great belt of whisky except it oxidizes rapidly and passes off, not like alcohol. You'll get sedatives and vitamins to build you up. You get a doctor's examination when you enter."

"Supposing I get the D.T.'s?"

"Oh hell," Tom said. "You're not that bad. You don't look in tough shape at all. It's up to you and your wife, of course. You'll have to discuss it with her. But I'd decide one way or the other now. Do you want me to leave a while so you can talk to her?"

"No, no," Ralph said. "Maybe you could explain it. I don't know. I couldn't stand talking to her now."

"Well, maybe you'd better call her. If you were going to go, it might be better to leave before the children get up and the neighbours are around."

Ralph went halfway up the stairs from the kitchen and called softly, "Anne, Anne, can you come down a minute?"

He came back and sat down.

"Did she hear you?" Tom asked.

"Oh, she's been listening all the time," Ralph said.

Mrs. Hilton came down into the kitchen. She was pale and distraught and was trembling slightly.

"Well, I guess you've really done it this time," she said to Ralph.

"Could we talk a few minutes, Mrs. Hilton?" Tom asked.

"This is Tom," Ralph said.

"How do you do? Is there anything you can do with him?"

"Well," Tom said, "I know how you must feel but things will work out all right. This isn't unusual, you know, though I realize that's probably small comfort to you right now. This is a sickness like any other. Can we talk somewhere?"

Remembering the vanilla extract under the sofa, Ralph said, "Why don't you go in the sun porch and close the door?"

"God, what a mess you are," his wife said, crossing the kitchen. "Come this way, Mr.——?"

"Just Tom, Mrs. Hilton."

In the sun porch Tom said, "Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Hilton. Did you overhear our talk in the kitchen?"

"Yes," Anne said. "Oh, I hope you can do something with him. I've tried everything, everything, from being kind to getting mad. I can't do anything else."

"Sure, sure," Tom said softly. "I don't know why it is but a man's wife never can get him sober or help keep him sober until the man makes up his mind for some other reason. He's too ashamed and carries a burden of guilt and with his wife he's always on the defensive, trying to justify himself. It's not your fault. I'm sure you've done everything possible. It's probably for the very reason that you love each other that you can't help him. Only another drunk like myself can really understand him because I've been like him. The thing now is to get him sober and then I think we can help him if he wants to be helped."

"Oh, I guess he does all right."

"Well, what do you think of the hospital? It's not bad, really. And it is the quickest and easiest way to get him sober. Then there is yourself and the children to consider. You'll all be upset with him around shaking and heaving and maybe trying to sneak drinks. If he stays home and drives the car, he's liable to get picked up and lose his licence."

"If he lost his licence, he'd lose his job. He's a salesman."

"How about his job? Has he been working?"

"I don't know. The day before yesterday he went out and came back late but I don't know if he made any calls. Yesterday he stayed home."

"Can you say he's sick, if his boss calls?"

"No, not any more. I'm through lying for him. I just can't do it any more. I shudder when the phone rings."

"I know," Tom said. "I put my wife through that torture. If he goes in today, they won't let him make a call till tomorrow noon at the earliest. Can you just say your husband has been called away and that he will telephone tomorrow? Then we'll leave it up to Ralph to explain. He'll have to do a little sweating with this thing. Maybe the boss won't call anyway, if he thinks Ralph is out around."

"All right," Anne said. "Shall I have him pack some clothes?"

"Oh, no. We can go right along. He can get a toothbrush and stuff there. He's suffering a lot, you know, physically and mentally, so the sooner he's in bed with medication the better."

When they entered the kitchen, Ralph was staring out into the yard.

"Well, what do you say? Shall we go?" Tom asked.

"Like this?" Ralph asked. "Right away?"

Tom chuckled a little. "At least you're conscious, which was more than I was when they dumped me at Callahan's Farm."

"All right."

Ralph started towards the front door. He stopped and turned.

"I'm sorry, Anne," he said. "Oh God, I'm sorry. For you and the children."

"All right," Anne said. "Go ahead now. We'll be all right."

## V

THE events of that day were implacable and moved with an almost mathematical precision, though it is doubtful that any normal person watching Evelyn Johnson would have observed this, nor indeed would Evelyn Johnson herself, for she was still under the illusion that it was her will that was making decisions for her whereas in reality the sequence of occurrences was contrary to her wishes and she would have refused this day's destiny if she had been given a conscious choice. That she would be blamed was also inexorable, since to accuse is in the nature of man, whose understanding re-

mains, of a necessity, restricted, and whose consciousness apparently will never reach that scope where all, every factor, is encompassed and his judgment finally is a joyful accepting silence. Evelyn Johnson blamed herself, not consciously always, since resentment lent her justification and self-pity gave it emotional validity, but in the depths of her being where the awareness of guilt spread her conception as in a monstrous nativity, guilt and shame wrenching a simple contrition into an unnatural shape that could not be expelled. She was no longer capable of discerning within herself the false from the genuine, nor was the real purpose of her conscious thought always apparent to her.

Thus, when she told her children, and insisted above their objections, that they should buy their lunches at school that day, she believed the explanation she gave her husband, Robert. She would be just too busy with house-cleaning and washing clothes to prepare their lunch.

"That's all, is it?" Robert remarked. "Just house-cleaning and washing clothes."

She did not pursue the subject. Her back was towards her husband and his dry tone made her inside quiver as in a first timorous fetal stirring. She hurried to the living-room where her two children were preparing to leave.

"Have you got your quarters for lunch?" she asked, reaching for her handbag on the desk.

Her son, Robert, Junior, who was twelve, shook his head.

"You know we haven't any money," he said.

"I've got a dime but it's for Scout dues," his sister answered. "I'm going there from school."

"All right, Elaine."

Evelyn Johnson thoughtfully returned her handbag to the desk.

"I haven't any change," she said. "See your father for lunch money."

She stood, tense and listening, while her husband gave the children their money. When they returned she opened the front door and kissed them as they went out.

"You're not sick this morning, Mama?" Bobby asked.

"No. I'm all right," she answered, smiling. She felt a painful unworthiness at his concern and a growing agitation at the thought of saying good-bye to her husband.

"You didn't have any breakfast," Bobby persisted, still looking up at her.



Evelyn stepped past him as though to look at the shrubbery by the door.

"No. I'll have it as soon as your father leaves. I slept a little late. Isn't it nice and warm and sunny today? Will you watch football practice after school?"

"I'll come home. Maybe you'll want me to do something."

"Come on, Bobby," his sister called from the pavement.

"No. There's nothing, nothing for you to do," Evelyn Johnson said. "Go on, now."

She went back to the kitchen and poured herself a cup of coffee, but she did not want to try drinking it till Robert had left. He returned from his bedroom, knotting his tie.

"Tonight we'll go over the bills," he said.

Her husband had the habit of discussing each bill thoroughly before writing a cheque for it and it seemed to her that his questions implied criticism. This increased her doubt of her judgment, so that even small decisions loomed threateningly.

Evelyn walked to the front door with him. He opened the door and turned to her. Their glances met briefly with a peering quality as he leaned to kiss her. For the past two months he had taken to kissing her on the cheek instead of the lips and now at his touch she felt chagrined and wounded.

"Have you any money?" he asked, moving out on the wide brick step.

"No," she said.

"Perhaps that's best," he remarked. He went on down the walk.

Evelyn Johnson closed the door and leaned her back against it, trembling. The sun streamed in the rear windows of the living-room, lighting up the dust under the desk, the lint on the carpet, the finger marks on all the polished surfaces. She stared a few moments, waiting for the breach in her dignity to heal, before returning to the kitchen. Now, she thought, I'll arrange the day.

But the smell of the bacon she had cooked was rather sickening. The telephone rang and she frowned. She stood up uncertainly. When it stopped ringing, she carried her coffee to the sink and emptied half a cup. Then she entered the dining-room and took a half-pint of whisky from under the linen in the sideboard. As she did she remembered a remark someone had made once, that whisky was put up in half-pints for sale to old women and rummies. It was not a happy thought but when she poured the whisky in her black coffee, she said, "Coffee royal," and that sounded rather nice. It tasted rather nice, too, and she ate two slices of toast, and because

she did not have to force herself she felt she could have another one, just to give her the initial energy to start the day's toil.

She had gone to bed quite early and drunk the pint of port wine in her pillowcase, most of it before falling asleep, which had been an hour or two after, and the remainder when she woke up during the night. She had not intended to drink it but the loneliness had overcome her, the loneliness and the desire for her husband whom she knew would not enter her room. It was two and a half months since he had come to her and the wine deadened the thought that he might be spending himself elsewhere. But her eyes had been clear on waking up, and her face composed, and this façade had given her the confidence to face her family as she prepared breakfast.

Evelyn walked to the living-room and looked into the large mirror above the fireplace. Her eyes and face remained calm and she smiled a little, thinking, I'll have a good day, which meant that she would be able to drink a small amount happily and for only the calmness and strength necessary for the day's activities.

When she picked up her cup she was surprised to find that she had finished the drink already, but this faintly disturbing realization was displaced as the small unusual action, which would allow her expansion, was revealed to her. She made another coffee royal and carried it to the flagstone patio outside the kitchen. She had never done this before. She set the cup on the tubular metal table and sat down and lit a cigarette without the fear that it would nauseate her. The sun was caressingly warm. The lawn sloped gently downward to the high rustic fence in the rear. There were pools of shadow under the low thick foliage of the split maple and the oak and columns of shade from the three poplars back by the fence. She saw two robins, one bluejay, four sparrows, and a grey squirrel jumping along the top of the fence to the poplars. A yellow leaf fell and she followed it as it drifted down, first one side of the leaf tipping up, then the other, as it rocked gently downward through an invisible sea.

Everyone, she supposed, was vacuuming or sorting clothes or dry-mopping the polished floors. She sat perfectly still, thinking: The yellow leaves are falling, the squirrel is hunting, the birds are searching, the sunlight falls on the green, green lawn—and wanting somehow to reach through to something, to touch the faint source of colour and movement and to be pure, not thinking this but longing in a subdued manner which did not disturb her lethargy. She remained within the quietness of herself for five minutes, then she

rose with a vague air and went into the kitchen. Her elbow jarred the door jamb, making the cup rattle on the saucer, and this surprised her, both the noise and the passing pain. It was a warning she was incapable of heeding.

When Evelyn returned to the terrace she brought the morning paper that her husband had already read. It was folded to an inside page. She put her elbow on the table, leaning her head on her hand. The faint blonde hair of her forearm glinted in the sun and her eyes followed the line on the inside of her arm where the down ended along a blue vein. Then she glanced at the paper, at the title of an article, "The Life Stream." The heart, it said, pumps four to five quarts of blood per minute, astonishing, considering that the total volume of blood in an individual is only twelve to thirteen pints. The stream of life is flowing at the rate of eighteen hundred gallons every twenty-four hours. A great fear stabbed her and she pushed the paper away and drank quickly, emptying the cup and hurrying back into the kitchen. She piled the breakfast dishes in the sink rapidly, washed them, and put them in the draining rack. The half-pint was more than half empty. She picked it up and hurried into her bedroom, clutching her robe tightly about her middle in a protective gesture. She glanced fleetingly at herself in the dresser mirror, pushed her hair back with one hand, and entered the bathroom where she set the bottle beside the tub and turned on the hot water. She disrobed and walked back into the bedroom.

Beneath her underwear in a bureau drawer was a fifth of sherry in which three or four inches of wine was left. She drank this in two gulps.

She decided to have a bath. In the tub Evelyn scrubbed herself vigorously. She looked over the side to make sure the bottle was there, for several times she had felt faint while bathing, faint and almost hysterical. The bottle was within reach. She opened it and swallowed half the remaining contents, frowning at the taste. She rubbed her breasts softly with thick suds. When she had rinsed and dried herself she stood before the door-length mirror. The bottle was somehow in her hand and she thought: What an ad. She finished the bottle and shoved it down deep below the dirty clothes in the laundry hamper.

Perhaps it was now that Evelyn Johnson passed over into a blackout. Blackout is, simply expressed, loss of memory, but it is more than this, for below the normal surface appearance that might convince even a keen observer that the victim is not even drunk, there is an irrational turmoil of thought and emotion that may remain

hidden or break out into inexplicable action. There is no sharp division between normal awareness and the blackout area, which is marked off on either side by the jagged loss and the jagged recovery of memory, and the real terror lies on the far side, where, recovered, the victim finds the fabric of his life rent. Now, Evelyn, standing once more before the mirror, exercised thought and action with the illusion of control, at once speculating about her nakedness, ostensibly rational, and planning in thoughts that hardly touched her mind, planning without sequence, as perhaps an animal does to replenish her supply of alcohol.

She became somewhat entranced with her body, quite profound about it with her mind unrestrained and living now on a plane suddenly separated from the suburban world with its intolerable weight of circumstances, all of which had become to her only duties. On the inside of her hips were the faint watermarks of the stretched skin of childbirth. Making me a genuine full-bond mother, she thought.

She cupped her breasts and stood on tiptoe to cure the flat, earthy, peasant look of women without shoes. A pinnacle. The bank would be open. She turned sidewise and dropped her arms but remained on her toes. It's been only an hour since the children left and he kissed my Lady Esther cheek. She was surprised. The housework I can do this afternoon. But here, now, standing like this, it is a pyramid and I am the pinnacle.

The pyramid was an image of sudden enlightenment, not erected stone by stone with laborious thought, but appearing complete and labelled. Its base was Robert and his salary and above this insurance and far-sighted policy and security and above this yet the mortgage and the mortgage insurance supporting the house and the mop and the vacuum cleaner and the turned-down bed with fresh linen supporting the long lost coupling of love supporting the time of carrying and planning and the scream of childbirth supporting Bobby and Elaine supporting herself now on tiptoe and naked with breasts no longer pointed to the sharp wind of night but full and round as a suburban day.

I'll go over on the turnpike, not to the city. I'll buy a fifth for the week. Evelyn went to her bedroom and took out fresh stockings and sheer black underwear and the short black girdle, none of which had performed the service for which she had bought them. She would return them, along with the perfume that the ad implied would excite a eunuch. She laughed, and, gazing at herself in the mirror, still saw no signs of anything but a suburban mother

whose beauty was softly assuming gentleness. Her face was yet full and clear. I am a pale drunk. But looking closer she saw that her cheeks were slightly flushed. It's that hot bath. And her eyes. She smiled and the eyes were all right. I am thirty-five and at this early age without a love to call my own, without even a man to lay me.

She turned around and looked for the half-pint and then remembered she had finished it and now the compulsion was upon her. She realized there was nothing to drink. Nothing at all. So that she hurried to the living-room as she was and was reaching for the phone when it started to ring. She smiled to herself and picked up the receiver.

"Evelyn?" the voice of Mrs. Dennison said.

"Sorry. You have the wrong number."

"Isn't this Evelyn Johnson?"

"This is Mrs. Mahoney and who, in Christ's sake, might you be?"

"Oh," Mrs. Dennison said. "Oh," as she hung up.

Evelyn called the taxi then and hurried back to put on the bra and slip her flowered print dress over her head and walk, quite languidly, if the neighbours were watching, out to the front lawn where she touched the little spruce trees and the trunk of the white birch. The light flowered print. She had not put on a slip and the sun was still slanting from behind with the shadows cast towards the road. The silhouette will show. Would the driver be happy?

The taxi pulled in and she forgot to notice whether he noticed.

"The People's Savings Bank," she said.

Evelyn appeared quite composed. There was no trembling or nervousness which marks the unstable drunk. The inward gnawing and craving did not show. She was stable and calm and she was chewing a green gum that was supposed to kill the odour, but did it really?

"Yes, ma'am," the driver said.

This was her secret, the small bank account she had had for years, before she was ever married, that Robert, who was always so sharp with figures, had forgotten long ago. Originally it had been for one hundred and fifty dollars but after Robert had shut off the money it had dwindled rapidly. She did not know what at first had caused her to leave the book at the bank so that he would not rediscover it. How puzzled he was at times! Now there was seventy dollars left. She saw the driver looking at her in the mirror. Could he see anything but her face? She crossed her legs, raising the flowered print high as she did so. Well, I'm not asking him to buy a dozen new shirts anyway.

"Will you wait?" she asked at the bank. "Aren't the trees lovely with the turning leaves? I'll be only a minute."

As she strolled up the walk that divided the lawn, she felt the beauty of the September day as a pain, all beauty pressing exquisitely between her breasts with yearning and desire and the day, the sunny day, high above her sending down its beams to bless her passion. The bank was almost empty. She did not have to stand in line. She withdrew twenty-five dollars. There was a balance of forty-five. I must remember, she thought, as she walked out steadily, slowing, sauntering in her sobriety, aware and alive at the day, hearing the horns of the flowing cars, feeling the sun, feeling they do not know. She entered the taxi.

"Drive me over to the turnpike," she said. "I want to pick up some whisky."

Saying it like that, boldly, meant she was not hiding it and therefore did not need it. Just for a cocktail party, you know.

"The turnpike?" the driver said. "It's closer to Malden."

"I don't want to go to Malden."

"It will cost you two dollars for the fare."

The driver had turned around with his right arm up on the back of the seat and he looked at her as she sat in the right-hand corner. She had lighted a cigarette and she let the smoke out of her mouth as she returned his stare. Now she crossed her legs freely, once more lifting the flowered print high, then spreading its wideness with another careless flick or so. She saw the driver, a young man, lower his eyes and then raise them quickly. Had he seen the flesh of her thighs?

"I didn't ask you what it cost," she said haughtily.

"Yes, ma'am," the driver said.

I'm still good-looking and I've got a good shape. She lowered the window and the breeze was cooling and helpful. But the day was high, very high, rather distant. She did not know what she meant by this exactly. I have a certain station in life. Robert loves detail. A smutty pun could be made. The driver was adjusting the mirror. So he wants to look, like they all do, cowardly and furtively, even Mr. Dennison and all Robert's friends. She began to shake a little, ever so little, and she wished he would hurry. Would she be able to sneak one without his seeing? The hysteria of her need was mounting.

They were at the turnpike now and it was only a mile to the store. Her chin was trembling slightly and she clamped her teeth. My own teeth, white and clean as any half-stripped, three-thou-

sand-a-week, untalented piece of flesh posing obscenely before soldiers and making them long for what it was impossible for them to get. Oh God, I am not this way. She felt as if she would weep but she lit another cigarette and saw the slanting sign of the liquor store.

In the few moments that it took the taxi to stop before the store and the driver to get out, the veils of her being were ripped asunder and she saw her naked soul exposed pitilessly in the white light that incised the sombre darkness of her mind. No words formed. There was only a complete and sudden realization, like a stabbing pain in her heart, and then just as completely gone, vanished, leaving not even time for a plea for mercy, a cry of defence, or an acknowledgment of offence. The driver, who had opened the door, saw only that she shuddered quickly before getting out.

Evelyn Johnson had no choice as she walked into the store, no more choice than a patient has of a cancer's growth. She was wholly alone.

"Yes, ma'am," the clerk said.

"Oh, I wanted some whisky," Evelyn said casually.

"Yes, ma'am?" the clerk said.

Why in Christ's name do they all say Yes, ma'am? It makes me feel plain. Shall I get a fifth or two fifths? I can put it in the cellar. I can't waste the money on taxi fares.

"I wanted a fifth or something. Something that mixes well," she said, continuing the act though she was cringing now inwardly for the drink and knew each word would delay it. "And a fifth of Gordon's gin," she said, which astonished her because she had never drunk gin before. I act too well.

The clerk went for the gin and she looked along the row of whisky bottles with their bright labels, remembering the man of distinction and the foreign correspondent and the sportsman, man, that's whisky, and your key to hospitality in the deep old Southern tradition, that's all.

"Give me a whisky that is old something," she said. "Like Old Crow or Old Grandad or Old Thompson or Old Overholt or Old Fitzgerald or Old Black Joe. But not any old Jock or old Sandy. I don't want Scotch."

The clerk laughed. "Most of them old ones are bourbon," he said.

"Well make it bourbon, then."

"Here's the bourbon," the clerk said.

"Oh, and I want a half-pint of brandy. Let's see, it was Christian Brothers."

Christian Brothers? God! That was different. But then not so different as you might at first think. Father John's, St. Joseph aspirin, Three Monks wine, an ecclesiastical assortment of medicines and booze. She put the half-pint in her handbag and discovered the clerk looking at her with some little obscene twist on the corner of his mouth.

As she left the store, she glanced at a filling station next to it and breathed deeply in relief. She walked quickly to the cab, put the two bottles on the seat, and said, "I'll be just a moment." In the ladies' room of the filling station—thank goodness she hadn't had to go for a key—she opened the brandy and took a big drink. She looked in the mirror for signs and decided none showed.

She walked jauntily back to the cab. She was smiling. She stepped by the driver's door.

"Isn't it grand out?" she said, breathing deeply with her bosom close to his face. She leaned over a bit. "You can drive as slow as want back."

"Yes, ma'am," the driver said.

"Oh, don't keep saying 'Yes, ma'am'," she complained, opening the door and getting in. "You know my name, don't you?"

"It's Mrs. Johnson."

"Yes, that's right. Evelyn Johnson, housewife."

And she crossed her legs, raising the hem high as the driver turned around, his eyes travelling up to her face, which was suddenly very hot and flushed. The muscles of her thighs contracted.

"Do you want to go up the turnpike a ways and then over route one-twenty-eight?"

She ran one hand along her shin until her knee was uncovered and at the side surely he must see.

"That would be nice," she said, primly pulling the hem down again.

The driver adjusted the mirror. She noticed now that the cab had a side mirror also. Robert had always come to her three or four times a month on schedule, after the boxing bouts on TV on Wednesdays and sometimes on a Saturday night if he had had a highball and it hadn't made him sleepy. She was always waiting upstairs and listening to the announcer and cheering silently for an early knock-out.

She sat up straight, suddenly, and ran her fingers across her forehead. She wanted another drink. Would he see? She unsnapped her handbag. What was the difference, anyway? Why do I hide



from him? He's not paying the bills. She unscrewed the cap and got the bottle all ready, waiting.

"Isn't that a new motel?" she asked, and quickly raised the bottle and gulped as the driver turned to look.

"It was put up last spring," he said. "There's a lot of them along here. Cabins, too."

"Yes," Evelyn said.

"They're pretty nice."

"Yes," Evelyn said. She took another drink, openly, not caring if he saw, planning and yet not planning for what might be coming, and if it came, not wanting a defence of any kind, of thought or anger or indignation or self-loathing, just to have it happen as a pure act, an act of God, an accident, say, sort of, in this high, this very high, sunny day. She was thinking without thoughts. Her being was moving vortically. The bottle was empty already. "I've never been in one," she said, caressing her breasts.

"Oh, they're nice."

"This is your own cab, isn't it?" Evelyn asked.

"Yes. We all own our own cabs. We chip in for the office and phone."

"That must be why you drive so slowly," she said, crossing her legs and smiling at the mirror.

"You said to."

"Yes," Evelyn said. "I did, didn't I? What time is it?"

"Half-past ten or so."

I had the first drink at nine. A half-pint of whisky, a half-pint of brandy, and, oh yes, the wine, but that was nothing.

"Why, do you have to be somewhere at a certain time?"

"Oh, no. I have the whole day till the children come home."

"What are you drinking?" the driver asked.

There was an immense and shocking silence. She could not hear the sound of the car and the day became more distant yet, extreme, elevated high above her. Shall I be indignant? How can I? Do I want to? I want to be—not indignant—loved.

"It's brandy," she said. "Would you like a drink?" she asked coyly.

"I would, but not here in the car."

She had no reply to this. It's your move. She was breathing rapidly. Not in the dark beneath the suffocating covers. She squirmed on her seat. Her eyes did not seem to be able to look in one direction for very long.

"What kind of brandy is it?"

"Why, it's Christian Brothers," she said. "Old Christian Brothers giving us their blessing."

"Yeah?" the driver said. "Listen, these cabins up ahead are owned by a friend of mine. Maybe we could stop there and have one."

"Just for the drink," Evelyn said, knowing the denial was really an affirmation. How had it all fallen in place like this?

The driver stopped and said, "Wait a minute."

She began to loosen the top of the fifth of bourbon while he was gone. She watched him return and her throat felt full and thick. He was not too tall but he was slender and clean looking. She could not believe it would really happen.

"Just for the drink," she said, sliding along the seat so that her skirt was pulled.

"That's right," he said, grinning.

"Would you rather have a drink of whisky?" she asked.

"That would be better."

"Are you married?" she asked.

"Sure. With two kids."

She felt happy. It was all right, then. He was married. They were both married. The word *married* had a strange sound. What she did he would do, even though he had not been drinking.

The cabin was clean with a hardwood floor and a rug. There was a bed and an easy chair and a bureau, all in cheap maple but new.

"I've never been in a cabin before," Evelyn said. She examined the small washroom with its shower stall. In the mirror her eyes looked strange, narrow, and the bones of her face seemed to jut.

"Bring the glasses from there," the driver said. He had taken the fifth and had finished opening it. Evelyn put the two glasses on the bureau and sat in the easy chair, smoothing her dress along her hips before sitting. When the driver handed her the drink she stood up again.

"Down the hatch," he said and gulped his drink.

"Up the mast," she replied, and started to laugh. It was the first time that day she had felt any simple merriment. To hell with feeling. "Another one?" she said.

"Well," the driver said doubtfully. "Maybe one."

Evelyn sat on the bed and held out her glass.

"You're sure you want one?" he asked.

"Sure I'm sure. The more I have the better I'll be."

Will he start now? Will he touch me?

"I drive Mr. Johnson to the train sometimes on a rainy morning," the driver said.

"Who is Mr. Johnson? If he had any sense he'd stay in bed on a rainy morning."

She set the drink on the bureau and bent over to pull at the top of her stocking through her dress. She felt his hand timidly on her shoulder and then its withdrawal. Why couldn't he take the initiative? As she straightened up she staggered a little against the bureau.

"You have had a few," the driver said.

She took the driver's hand.

"Can we stay a little while?"

And then she was flatly against him, not kissing him but with her face on his shoulder. She was sighing. His hands began to fondle her and she was blissfully still, feeling the pressure here and there on all the secret sacred spots. She could hardly stand and she continued to lean heavily against him.

"Don't wrinkle my dress," she said.

"Do you want to take it off?" he said.

"Oh, yes," she said eagerly. This was what she wanted, really wanted, to stand clean and naked in the light of day. But when she raised her dress over her head, she staggered and the driver had to put his two hands on her ribs to steady her. The dress came away from her head and she tossed it to one of the chairs.

She stretched out on the bed and closed her eyes. Her breath was pushing her lips apart with little bubbles at each exhalation. She waited and waited for the humming to stop, for the day to stand still, for her desire to be sharp and razor clean, for the entry, with her eyes closed, and trying to hear what he was saying off there somewhere, where was he? in the blurred cruel edges of the world, in the clean dirtiness, where her desire was dying, you sleep a while and I'll be back, to lay me, to lay me down, yes, be back, back before the children, forgive me Robert, forgive me Bobby and Elaine, as the tears are on my cheeks, how did it ever happen? ever happen in all this stillness with faint sounds roaring like small animals about the room, it is a tiptoe leaving, and I am alone.

Evelyn Johnson pushed the cover aside suddenly. She stared all around as if to recognize her location. Her eyes were puffed now and reddened and concentrating in an idiot stare that focused on the paper bag there, over there, as she pushed herself to the edge of the bed without losing sight of the bag, pushed herself erect, and trembling, trembling, one step and then another, pushed her hand before her towards the paper bag. She seized it, leaned over the bureau, with her hair falling over her face, with her stockings falling, and retreated backward to the bed, violated, trampled, ravished

by what? by what? having sought innocently and unknowingly the last frontier of revolt, the bed and the bottle. There was nothing, nothing whatever to do, as she fell back on the bed after drinking, rolling over with a moan, neither smiling nor weeping, with desire dead, staring at the little printed houses on the drapes of the window next to the bed until she passed into complete unconsciousness.

None of this would ever be remembered. It would never have happened. It happened to the cab driver. It would never happen to Evelyn Johnson. It would be cut, mercifully, from the script and irrevocably lost. There would be only the jagged edges of the day's start and the jagged edges of the day's end that was still to come. It was twelve o'clock. It was four hours after Evelyn Johnson had received her husband's kiss at the door. But this day had been shaped far in advance. The sun lay softly on the tiny cabin containing Evelyn Johnson and on the highway the motorists sped unknowingly past. The day is high, very high and distant, and who can lean his chin in his hand, looking down there, not in forgiveness for there is nothing to forgive, but in tender compassion and love?

## VI

MARY J. was sitting by an open window in her living-room when the phone rang. For some minutes she had been staring at the tops of the poplars that lined a street running at right angles to her own street. The poplars were quite tall and seeing the tops against the high blue sky had given her this time of peace and reverence. She did not think of these moments as contemplation, though that is what they really were, but rather as small islands in the sea of day. She had discovered such intermissions in the act of living eight and a half years ago when she had been trying to find a way to practice the eleventh step, "We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out."

Being little acquainted with religious practices, her parents hav-

ing been agnostics, Mary had at that time gone to the library and read a number of books which had served only to confuse her. There were so many paths and so many involved theologies that to find a simple guide through study was impossible for her. So she stopped reading about God.

Prayer had disturbed her, also, for no matter what words she had used they had always seemed to have various meanings and shades, and the wish in her remained really unexpressed. So she had abandoned verbal prayer except for two short sentences about which there could be no question of meaning or intent, the one in the morning, "If it is God's will, let me remain sober this day," and in the evening, "I thank God for this day's sobriety." She had been sober now eight and a half years, over three thousand days.

But she had had a feeling of failure in the eleventh step and so she had taken the moment's silence which opened the meetings and had tried to use this during the day. At first she had had to make a conscious effort to remember. While doing her housework she would interrupt her activities and sit still for several minutes. Initially she had found her thoughts filled merely with a continuation of her housework but after a time her thoughts changed subtly. She would think, How still everything is, or, It is fall now, or, How far away this day in September is from that day in February. It had been in February long ago that she had taken her last drink.

Further than this she had reached occasional moments of suspended consciousness when life and all its movements were deferred. She no longer had to remember or consciously seek these apertures in time. They came to her almost as part of her physical functions.

Evidently they affected her physical functions, too, for Mary was at sixty-two just plain downright healthy. Her husband at times looked at her with amazement.

"It is simply impossible that you were ever a drunk," he would say. "It must have been a great hoax of some kind. But don't ever try it again," he would add hastily.

One would have sworn that Mary J. had never even been tipsy, let alone a sodden drunk who had been hospitalized five times at Callahan's Health Farm in the early days before Callahan had decided that a wholly male drunk farm would be more profitable and less bewildering than a coeducational one. Her hair was grey, on the whitish side, her skin was pale and clear with a touch of colour in her cheeks. She was plump, not loosely fat but solid, matronly in an inoffensive way. She dressed simply and expensively. Only in her eyes was there any trace of her having known anything but a quiet

continuing journey through a comfortable life towards old age. Her eyes at times glanced swiftly, narrowed, became penetrating. Otherwise there was a wholeness about her because her mind and heart were never in conflict and she had gained a deep wisdom, not only through her own suffering but from helping many other women.

The telephone rang at four o'clock, a time at which none of her friends ever called, so she was not surprised that it was Jean at central service. A pleasurable feeling of anticipation went through her, for even now, after all these years, she was still eager for twelfth-step work. The act of helping was to her an act of creation.

Her husband sometimes jokingly referred to her as a kitchen psychiatrist, but Mary thought of herself as an instrument. Certainly she had not originated any special method of helping. She had merely followed suggestions offered to her and had used them well because of the strength of her sympathy. Once she had had the rather frightened thought that in going to help others she might be playing God in a silly, hardly conscious fashion, but she had put this thought hastily aside. She knew that for an alcoholic to be continually questioning motives was dangerous. It could lead to an impotent frustration that would welcome the initially unifying effect of booze.

"I've got a call from your town," Jean said. "Thirty-four Beech Road."

"It's a good neighbourhood," Mary said.

"Can you go over? It's a gal about thirty-five."

"Tell me about it, Jean."

"Well, the husband called."

"Oh, one of those. You know I can't go barging in on some woman because her husband doesn't like her drinking. If she's like I was, she'd throw me out and I'd deserve it."

"No, no. It's not like that. The husband, his name is Robert Johnson, said his wife asked him to call. Her name is Evelyn. He was rather cautious on the phone but he said this thing, as he called it, has happened quite a number of times."

"Did he say how bad she is?"

"Quite bad, he said. But that could mean anything."

"All right. I'll go over, but I hope the wife really does want to see me."

"Hey, get this. You'll like this. Mr. Johnson said, 'Send one of your very best workers, I'm willing to pay for the best.'"

"Well, that was considerate of him. What did you say?"

"Why, I told him I would send the very best. Aren't you pleased? And that there was no expense involved. And now, mind you, with his wife-like that, he gets all curious about our financial structure."

"Most services have a price, Jean. After all these years I don't believe you understand how most sober minds work."

"Oh, go to hell," Jean said laughing.

Mary J. did not hurry over to Beech Road. She slowly changed from her house dress to a black suit with a white blouse. She combed her hair and put on some faint make-up and a mild perfume. She checked her money and put her wallet, with some AA pamphlets, in a bulky handbag. Then she sat down to write a note to her husband.

"Harry. I've just received a twelfth-step call. I don't know how long it will take. If I'm not home for supper, there is a salad in the refrigerator. I'm fixing the coffee, so just plug it in. There's a cake in the bread box. Hasn't it been a beautiful day? Love, Mary."

The last thing to do before leaving was to get a half-pint. There were four half-pints of bourbon lined up in a kitchen cupboard. Harry still drank occasionally when they had company and each time he went to the liquor store he brought back what he called a twelfth-step half-pint for Mary. It was at her suggestion that he bought hundred-proof bourbon.

"An alcoholic doesn't want a taste of whisky," she had explained. "He wants a big belt of real booze."

She put the half-pint in her bag and left. She found Beech Road and turned into it. It was a development of ranch-type houses with a generous piece of land to each residence and with trees and high hedges separating them. From the topography she guessed that very few of the neighbours would know of Evelyn's predicament. If her alcoholism was generally a secret it brought about the complication of continued secrecy. There was one good feature about being a well-known alcoholic. There was nothing to hide, everybody accepted the fact, and the only change, if there was one, had to be for the better, which aroused everyone's admiration.

Mr. Johnson must have been waiting because the door opened before she could ring the bell.

"I'm Mary J.," she said, speaking quite low. "You telephoned Boston a while ago about your wife?"

"Come in, come in," Robert Johnson said hastily. "Mrs.? Did you say Jay?"

"It's only my initial. Just Mary, then."

"Oh, yes, Mary," he said vaguely, with a faint air of discomfort at using her first name.

Mary glanced swiftly about the living-room. There was no sign of Evelyn, no sign of Evelyn's alcoholism.

"I'm Mr. Johnson," he said.

Facts fell into Mary's calculations without her thinking specifically of them. The husband, prim, precise, a very, very mild drinker if at all, an eight- or ten-thousand-dollar-a-year man, bewildered that such a thing could happen to his wife, not *a* wife but *his* wife, rather outraged at events, not a mean man but a man who kept emotions and enthusiasms quite correctly harnessed.

"Sit down, please," Mr. Johnson said, as if starting a formal interview.

"Thank you," said Mary.

"You're from——?"

"Alcoholics Anonymous," Mary said.

"Are you a social worker of some sort?"

"Why, no," Mary said. "I'm just an alcoholic."

Robert Johnson, who was smoking, looked away towards the rear of the room. Mary was aware that he was searching cautiously for a way to begin their talk and she felt a deep sympathy for him because of his distrust and uncertainty. She understood thoroughly the pride which made him hesitant, and being an alcoholic herself, she felt culpable because of his discomfort.

"Mr. Johnson, suppose I tell you a little about myself and then maybe you'll feel freer to talk. As I said, I'm an alcoholic—a former drunk, if you will. The title doesn't matter. Over eight years ago I was considered hopeless. I had been hospitalized five times for drunkenness. I had almost ruined my husband financially and socially. But I was able with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous to arrest the disease. Now my mind is at rest, I am physically healthy, I no longer have any craving for drink, and I am able to perform my duties as a wife as they should be performed."

Robert Johnson stood up and walked to the wide window at the front of the room. His back was towards Mary. He was of medium height, slender and trimly built.

"I don't think my wife is an alcoholic," he said.

"Well, we don't tell anyone she is an alcoholic," Mary said. "Why don't we proceed on just the assumption that it is a problem with Evelyn and is causing some confusion?"

"I really don't know why she drinks like that," Robert said. "We



have a nice home, as you can see. We have two nice children. There is nothing reasonable that we want for."

He turned around now and went back to his chair.

"What causes alcoholism?" he asked.

"I really don't know," Mary said. "I don't think anyone knows. I think the causes are so dispersed that it is impossible to say this or that is the cause.

"But we are not too much concerned with the causes of alcoholism. Unlike medicine or psychiatry, we don't look for the cause to effect a cure. We know there is no cure as such, only a continued arrestment. We know this from the observation and knowledge of thousands of alcoholics who have tried every conceivable way of correcting their trouble without success until they finally recognized there is no cure. We're inclined to say that the cause is of little importance. The important thing is an honest recognition of the condition and a desire to alleviate it."

Mary could see that Robert Johnson was impressed. He had listened intently. Evidently she had struck the right note in avoiding the emotional overtones that are so apt to enter the alcoholic's talk. But suddenly now Robert Johnson shocked and frightened her.

"I think I'll have my wife committed for a time," he said.

"God, you can't do that!" Mary cried involuntarily.

"But I can," Robert Johnson said. "I've talked the matter over with our doctor."

"I'm sorry I said that," Mary said quietly, looking down at her clenched hands. "I didn't mean that you can't legally, Mr. Johnson. I speak quite frequently to groups at state asylums and at women's reformatories. If I had my choice, I'd rather be a convict than an inmate. I ask you, please, Mr. Johnson, give us a chance to help her before you take such a step. To have her committed may leave a deep and ineradicable scar. And what of the children knowing that their mother was in an insane asylum, to put it bluntly? If she needs hospital care let me take her to a small place where she will be understood and given experienced care. She'd have to stay only a week. You can say she is suffering from chronic gastritis to explain her being there. But above all, let her sign herself in and agree to it."

"But supposing there is something else wrong with her?"

"If she is an alcoholic there probably are other mental worries. But we find that once the drink problem has been controlled these other things take care of themselves. Why not deal with what is apparent first?"

"But how can she do that?" Robert Johnson persisted, with the first sign of any pronounced emotion. "How can she drink and leave her responsibilities? She can't love her children much."

"It's a compulsive disease," Mary said. "That is the hardest thing for a non-alcoholic to realize. It's not a matter of will power or of love for her children or you. I don't know what happened today to cause you to call us, Mr. Johnson, but I'll swear that Evelyn woke up this morning fully intending not to drink, or at least not to get drunk."

"I've taken away the money but still she manages somehow to get drunk."

"My husband did that, too," Mary said. "But when an alcoholic needs a drink it seems that there is always a way to get it. You speak of love for her children. The love she has for them probably creates guilt and shame because she drank and then to kill this terrible feeling, she drinks more."

"I don't know everything about her drinking," Robert confessed. "She drinks when I'm not here. That is, I don't know how much she drinks, but that it is too much and is very dangerous is certain."

He rose once more and stood with his back to Mary while ostensibly he looked for an ash tray.

"My boy came home from school today and found his mother lying unconscious on the floor here by the sofa."

The deep pain in this admission entered Robert's voice despite his efforts to speak calmly. He remained at the window, turned away. Mary did not speak immediately.

Then she asked quietly, "Has it happened before?"

"About four or five times over the past year. But very, very often, though she has been up and around, she has been drinking excessively and has gone to bed immediately after dinner. There has been a long accumulation of small mistakes and forgetfulness and avoidance of obligations."

To spare him further torment Mary said, "It isn't necessary to tell me any more. I see myself mirrored. Let me talk to Evelyn. I'm sure we can help her. Once she has been sober for a time the outlook won't be so depressing."

"She's in the bedroom off the kitchen," Robert Johnson said. "I've sent the children over to my mother's for supper."

"Do you want me to talk to her and then speak to you?"

"Go in. Go in and talk to her. I don't know," Robert said. "I don't know what to do because of the children. If it wasn't for them——"

"I know," Mary said quickly to stop the conclusion of his thought.

"Do whatever you think best," Robert said in a surrender that was strange to him.

"There's only one thing to do now," Mary said. "To get Evelyn sober the easiest and quickest way and start her along day by day staying sober. Other things will fall in place."

"Go on in," Robert said, still looking out the front window. He shuddered slightly, his head with the trim, shaven neckline, his neat, well-tailored shoulders and slim back shaking with a foreboding of some further danger to the neatness of his life.

Mary guessed that Evelyn had overheard snatches of her talk with Robert because she herself would have listened unless she had been unconscious. Evelyn was sitting on the bed in her room. She was quite drunk yet, or again. She looked up quickly.

"Hello, Evelyn," Mary said, quietly serious. She smiled, "I'm Mary."

The problem was to gain Evelyn's confidence, to avoid somehow that keeper-patient relationship that would breed distrust and resentment. Evelyn Johnson still wore the clothes she had put on that morning, but the dress now was stale and damp in the front and wrinkled.

"I guess I did it this time," she said, trying to smile but managing only an agonized baring of her teeth. "I guess I'm done."

"Oh, take it easy," Mary said casually, almost callously. "Relax a little. You're still on your feet."

She pulled a chair up close to the bed and sat down.

"You really tied one on, hey?"

"I didn't tie it on. It attached itself to me," Evelyn said.

Mary laughed with genuine amusement. She was familiar with all the drunken expressions but this was a new one and really quite discerning. She guessed that Evelyn might be a witty, passionate woman whose normal spontaneity had been suppressed in adjusting herself to suburban life and her husband's traits. Mary glanced about. There was no bottle in evidence. Evelyn's head drooped in a despondent fashion.

"How do you feel?"

"Awful," Evelyn said.

"Well, you probably know I'm an alcoholic. I've been the same way many, many times. I can only say this. If you are having fun with booze, keep on drinking. That's what it's for. But if it's making you sick and you're filled with self-disgust and you want to stop, you can."

"I only drink to help me with my work."

"Yes, I used to tell myself, that," Mary said. "And in a way it was true at first. But it becomes a disease, Evelyn. You pass a certain point and then you can't cope with it any more."

"There's all the other things, and what will happen to them? How can anything be as it might have been?"

"Did you drink much today, Evelyn?"

"I guess so. I don't remember."

"Have you been drinking every day?"

"Mostly every day. And in bed at night. Oh God," Evelyn sighed.

She looked around the room with a frantic searching expression, fingering her cheek with a trembling hand. Mary knew the look.

"Here," she said, opening her bag and taking out the half-pint. "Have you got a glass?"

Evelyn did not answer but stood up and went to the bathroom. She did not stagger but she approached the bathroom door with a tangential lean, like a ship tacking or as a hound dog sometimes trots down the street. She came back and sat down on the bed. Mary poured two ounces in the glass.

"I don't know how I'm going to get out of this," Evelyn said. "Maybe he'll want a divorce. He wanted to send me away. Maybe he wants to get rid of me. How do I know he hasn't got another woman?"

"Oh, relax," Mary said. "Don't go getting all tense and waiting for a blow that will never come. How long have you been drinking steadily?"

"A long time," Evelyn said. "Two years?"

"Lord, I drank steady for eight years."

"I was sitting in back," Evelyn said. "This morning, you know. The sun was warm. I saw a squirrel. Everything was in order, everything you understand? Everything right in place. And now this. Why this?"

She began to weep slowly and quietly. Mary moved over and sat beside her on the bed. She put an arm around Evelyn. The fact that Evelyn's tears were maudlin made them no less distracting and the sorrow no less genuine to Mary. She knew that spiritual devastation was truly anguishing no matter what its origin might be.

"Okay," she said. "Let it go. But don't get me crying, too, or neither one of us will be worth a damn."

Evelyn said, "I didn't mean to."

"It's all right. Maybe you better have another shot. Here, give me the glass. Did you eat anything today?"

"A slice of toast."

"How have you been eating?"

"Not very well for a long time. There's something wrong with my stomach."

"You've had the heaves?"

"What's that?" Evelyn said.

"Dry retching."

"Almost every day."

"Well, it's an old complaint. It's the booze, that's all. All of us have had it. But if you want, you can get sober and stay sober and use the knowledge gained from suffering as a springboard to continuous peace and happiness. I should be on a soapbox, hey?"

Evelyn said in a dull voice, "How?"

"By accepting help, first of all," Mary answered.

"Can I tell you something?"

"Anything."

"My husband hasn't been near me for over two months."

"Well, would you want to go to bed with a man who was always drunk?"

"I'd take a drink and climb right in."

Mary laughed. "I mean, if you were continuously sober. That will straighten itself out."

"I didn't drink for two weeks once, shaking it out and waiting. It didn't do any good. Whew! I'm sick."

"How about going away for a week?" Mary asked.

Evelyn shrank away from her and turned with horror on her face.

"Is that why you came? You're with him. I believed you and now you're with him, to lock me up. I've got children to take care of. There's nothing wrong with me. I just need a night's sleep."

"No, no," Mary protested. "It's not like that. Nobody's going to lock you up. It's a hospital. You'll sign yourself in and if you don't like it, you can sign yourself out. It's just a way of getting sober and healthy fast, that's all. Only, don't be a damn fool like me. I had to have myself hospitalized five times before I realized that for me booze was the boss. I'll drive you up and you can have a couple of shots on the way and I give you my solemn word that if you change your mind, I'll bring you back. Evelyn, my husband and I are happy. We love each other. In bed, too, if that worries you. I haven't had a drink for eight and a half years. I took my last drink entering a hospital. Oh, Evelyn, I'm not a social worker or a paid reformer. I'm a former drunk. I'm trying to help because someone helped me, that's all. You've tried fighting it alone, try help instead."

"I'm not a bum," Evelyn said.

"None of us are," said Mary. "It's no disgrace to have a disease. Don't be unhappy about it. You're just going to a *hospital* for a rest. Here, stand up a moment."

Evelyn pushed herself erect and Mary glanced up and down.

"You've got a nice shape," she said. "Nice legs. And you're worried? Why, look at me. I'm short and round and I've got a good fifteen years on you."

Evelyn smiled and then looked downcast.

"What's the hospital like?"

"Oh, it's a small place. They just put you to bed with sedatives and help you sweat it out. It's a lot easier than shaking it out at home, I can tell you."

"Shall I change my clothes?"

Mary did not want her to use any more energy than necessary. She did not want her to collapse suddenly and become helpless.

"Just put a toothbrush and something in an overnight bag. I'll go have a word with Robert."

Robert Johnson was still standing by the front window. He turned as Mary entered the living-room.

"Well, she's willing to spend a week at the hospital. It's called Greenleaf Hill and it's in Raleigh. I'll drive her, if you'd rather. How will the children be?"

"Oh, I can get my mother to come over," Robert Johnson said wearily. "Is the hospital very expensive?"

"Eighty-five dollars for the six days she'll stay."

"All right," he said. "I don't want to see her go. I can't stand the sight of her like that."

A small anger was quickly repressed in Mary. She realized it was the degeneration of his wife which Robert Johnson was loath to see.

"I'll just go along with her, then," Mary said. "Here's my address and telephone number. I'll give you a call when I get back."

"Thank you," Robert Johnson said. "Thank you for the help."

"It's nothing," Mary said. "I hope you're not too unhappy about it. I think the week in the hospital will snap her out of it and then after, if you both agree, maybe she could go to a few meetings."

"I don't know about that. It's something I'll have to think over."

"Can I leave you a few pamphlets?" Mary asked. "One is an introduction to AA."

"I don't want things like that around. The children might see them," Robert Johnson said. "I'm going along to my mother's, where the children are. The latch on the door is set. Will you make

sure there are no cigarettes burning in Evelyn's room? Good-bye. Thank you again."

He hesitated, his hand resting against the edge of the half-opened door, his face turned to the street.

"It isn't that I don't try to understand," he said.

"I know," Mary answered softly.

"I just can't talk about it. She was so different before."

"Yes." She could hear the pain of his sorrow breaking through at last.

"Love," he said. "The loss is mine, too. But I have to try to hold things together some way. Whatever way I know."

Robert Johnson went out. Mary stood motionlessly a moment staring at the closed door. She wished she could have offered some greater consolation to him. She returned to the bedroom, determined that at least Evelyn should not be frightened and unhappy on her way to the hospital.

"Well, kid, how are you doing?" she asked, feeling that sudden relief decision affords.

There was a small train case on the bed and Evelyn was sitting beside it. She had a drink in her hand. It was colourless and Mary thought it was water.

"What do you know now?" Evelyn said. "I opened that train case and what do you know, there was a fifth of gin, almost full."

"Have you got everything in the case you want?"

"The fifth's all I need with the toothbrush."

"Good. I'll put what's left of the half-pint in my bag. You won't run short. Well, let's go, Evelyn. One sober drunk and one drunk drunk."

"Drunk, drunk, drunk, the boys are marching."

"That's the spirit," Mary said.

"The Old Overholt spirit," said Evelyn.

Mary laughed.

"I never drink anything but old something," Evelyn said. "Except a little wine, maybe, a little gin, and anything else handy."

"How do you feel now?" Mary asked.

"I don't feel a thing."

"Numb's the word."

Evelyn giggled and pushed her hair back, looking in the mirror.

"Where's Robert? What did he say?"

"Nothing much. He's gone over to his mother's to be with the children."

"He didn't want to say good-bye. Couldn't he have come in and

said he is sorry and let me say I'm sorry? Is that much to ask? He wanted to duck out. Did your husband duck out on you?"

"No," Mary said. "But he gave me a hell of a belt on the jaw a couple of times."

"Really? I wonder how that feels. Robert belts me with a word and then silence. What time is it?"

"Quarter to six," Mary said.

She saw a light coat in the open closet and took it off the rack.

"Here, let me put this over your shoulders. I'll carry the case. How are you walking?"

"Like a dream," Evelyn said.

They reached the front door and went out. The evening was quiet and peaceful. A commuter walked down the middle of the road. Mary turned to stand in front of Evelyn while he passed. Evelyn lowered her head. They stood like conspirators.

"Shhh!" Evelyn whispered. "Not a word. It's the sinister Mr. Bumstead and I'm Dickless Tracy."

Mary began snickering, tried to contain herself, and then laughed loudly.

"Dickless Tracy," she repeated. "Where did you ever hear that?"

They got in the car and Mary dove off slowly. Her handbag was on the seat and Evelyn opened it, taking out the half-pint. When they passed a thinly settled section she took a big gulp from the bottle.

Mary remained silent, driving slowly, aware that Evelyn was not feeling sick now, only drunk, and at the same time she glanced here and there at the quiet evening hushing the suburban streets, the gentle sun asking for only small sounds, the shadows drawing out into the road where leaves lay carelessly in colour, and she was amazed that she was so calm and happy sitting beside the floundering feelings of a drunk. When she had first gone out on twelfth-step work, she had felt so sensitive to the alcoholic's illness that she had often returned physically sick, a healer wounding herself, but she had realized that her help was hindered by a commiseration that became too identical. So she had practiced keeping an island of stability within herself.

"I drink to darn the hole of despair," Evelyn said.

"We all have, only to find destiny more unravelled," Mary answered.

"Yes," Evelyn said.



"But with two children, a home, a husband, why despair?"

"It's all just biology," Evelyn said. "And I guess you don't have much to say."

"Why fight it then? Join it. Accept it. What difference do the terms make if you accept them?"

"I don't know what you mean," Evelyn said. "I could stand another one, I could now. Is it all right, Mary? But it's the big hump, you know."

But Evelyn had lost the thread of her thought. She took another drink. The half-pint was empty. Mary hoped Evelyn would remain conscious. She would advise them not to give any paraldehyde until after Evelyn woke up. It was fortunate Robert had not come along. He would not have understood the drinking at this point.

"I used to lie in the sun," Evelyn said suddenly.

"When was that?"

"I don't know. When I was seventeen or so. The sun had fingers. I'd lie on my back and the sun was sort of feeling me and there was nothing to think about except I used to think of Jack Haselton. I was in love with him."

Evelyn began to weep a little.

"Why couldn't it be like that later?" she said. "Even clothes felt different then. I don't know. You could feel the cloth almost like another person."

"Yes?" Mary said. "Way back then."

"You could feel the cloth when you walked, kneeling it before you and swinging it, but all the time naked under it."

Mary tried to follow Evelyn's mind but the words became obscure except that it was youth that Evelyn was remembering.

"I was happy," Evelyn said.

"You will be happy."

"I will? I will, Mary?"

"It's certain. And without booze."

"With Robert?"

"If you want."

"Oh, I do. I do love him."

"We'll be there in fifteen minutes. Can you stay awake?"

"I won't pass out. I was just remembering things. Everything seems so long ago."

"You're young, Evelyn."

"Will you come to see me?"

"Of course."

"Don't let Robert come."

"Don't worry about it. Just be happy, Evelyn, that there is to be a change."

"Will you come to see me? What will they all say? Will they all know?"

"No one will know anything. Just be easy. Take it a day at a time. Now you've asked for help there is nothing to worry about."

"Why is it all so tragic? Why is everything messed up? It's like some terribly thoughtless joke to see oneself at seventeen and then at thirty-five and not know where the blows fell or what there was to defend against."

"Ah," Mary said, "I've learned not to be a fighter. If you don't fight you don't get beaten. Just rest, Evelyn, and one day in quietness you will know the shape and direction of your life is good and acceptable."

## VII

### 1

It was a strange house, a house called a hospital, though only one doctor ever visited it and only one of the nurses was registered, and yet things were not chaotic because the alcoholic patients helped each other and helped the elderly insane. The cleaning woman was an alcoholic, as were the maintenance man, the cook, the waiter, and the laundryman, and these people were better nurses than those who had the title, even though two of them were still drinking, hoping somehow to conquer by themselves the very force that had reduced them to working for little more than board and room.

The upper story contained rooms for the elderly Sarah, Jane, Mollic, Jennier--names which, along with certain characteristics, drifted down the broad varnished stairs to the alcoholics lounging in the lobby. Mollic had been crocheting a non-existent afghan for two years. Sarah always wanted the girls to come upstairs. There was a man hiding in Jane's room and it shocked pleasantly a remembered fearful hope. Jennier wrote verse that had inescapable rhythm, and rhymes occasionally more suited to soldiers. There was old Tom with his spools and reels and there was old Dr. Byrne who, perhaps, was not demented at all. He had three pastimes, playing his flute, looking at the new bridge through a telescope, meanwhile

speculating through whose farm the new highway ran, and reading. When Martin went up to see him he found the doctor gazing into a book with his one eye. There was no patch over the vacant socket but something seemed to stare through the inflamed slit. The doctor looked up and said, "Hah!" and Martin said, "May I come in?"

"You are in," the doctor said. His voice boomed as though with a vast anger, as if coming from an echo chamber in his chest. "Are you an alcoholic bastard?"

"I accept the adjective but the predicate nominative is possibly inncorrect," Martin said. "What are you reading?"

It turned out to be Hendrik Van Loon's *The Story of Mankind*, which surprised Martin, who would have guessed the book to be historical romance.

"I'm on the religions now," old Dr. Byrne said.

"And how do you like them?"

"I'm partial to the Mohammedans. But of course they're all a lot of nonsense."

"It's nice to have a one-word opinion," Martin said. "Simple and economical. Then you don't believe in God?"

"Well, now, if you can define God I can answer you."

"God cannot be defined," Martin said.

"Why, then I believe in God," Dr. Byrne said.

"I don't know whether your answer is pregnant or sterile."

"Are you a doctor?"

"No," Martin said, somehow flattered by the question.

"Then I'll tell you. I'm eighty-five. I'll live to be over a hundred. Why? Because my blood pressure hasn't varied three points in forty-five years. You see these rubber balls? I exercise with them every day and I play the flute for my lungs and memory."

"Do you want to live to be over a hundred?" Martin asked.

"Man, are you daft?" the doctor roared. "This is all there is."

At seven in the evening the old ladies in all the rooms began chirping and calling like birds in the notes of their various obsessions, and after ten minutes Dr. Byrne raised his flute and played an old tune, say "Silver Threads Among the Gold," and the voices fell silent one by one as he carried through two choruses. Then the nurse would go up and put them all to bed with sedatives and only a mild protest, high pitched and quavering, would drift down. The afghan must be folded. Sarah wasn't sure the girls were upstairs. Jane's closet should be searched once more. It is twilight always, Martin thought, and how gently they have lost the way, not in a tortuous maze as we here below.

Martin loved them all but he wondered if his love was not caused by the euphoria induced by the phenobarbital and the seconal. The source is not important, he decided doubtfully. But he stopped taking the sedatives given to him and carried them around in his bathrobe pocket.

The other alcoholics were still in bed and he could speak to them only briefly between their sleeps, except for Denny, who was always sitting in an easy chair in the bay window of his room, clad in a bathrobe and with one bandaged foot covered by a knitted bootie. His legs were wrapped in a blanket. Denny asked him riddles, but then he would ask how close the hospital was to the slaughterhouse.

"What slaughterhouse?" Martin would ask.

"Why, the one in Caribou," Denny would say with wide-eyed astonishment at the question.

"Caribou is five hundred miles away."

"Aren't we in Maine?" Denny would ask.

"No. In Massachusetts."

"You know, I'm all frigged up. I thought they brought me here from the camp. Listen, they got me sitting on something that feels like a quarter-keg hoop. See what it is, will you?"

Martin felt under the blanket. It was an inflated rubber ring.

"Why is the nose in the middle of the face?" Denny asked.

"I don't know."

"Because it's the scenter."

He had a lean bald head and very clear blue eyes that sparkled when he gave his answer. His whole body was wracked and wasted and it was strange that his eyes remained so bright. It was impossible to speak of alcoholism to him. It was not certain that his brain had not been permanently damaged. It is said that the brain can oxidize alcohol. Denny's brain must be like a bar rag, Martin thought.

"What will you do when you're discharged?" Martin asked.

"I guess maybe I'll take a walk down to the corner and have a couple of shots," Denny said.

"I have to go now," said Martin.

"Well, thank you. Gee, thank you for dropping in."

Martin felt guilty that his own nervousness would not permit him to stay longer.

In the women's ward Helen and Evelyn were asleep but Abbie was propped up, her mixture of blonde and brunette hair in disarray over her flushed, swollen face and evasive eyes. Martin sat down in a chair by her bed.

"What day is it?" she asked.

"Saturday?" Martin said doubtfully. "I haven't picked up time yet. When do you get out of bed?"

"Tomorrow."

"I guess everyone does. How are you feeling, Abbie?"

"Ah-h-h," she said with a rattling disgust. "How did you know my name?"

"From the nurse. Also that you've been here before."

"All the dirt, hey?"

"It is nothing to me," Martin said. "You're just Abbie to me, an alcoholic like myself."

"Do I look lousy?"

"You look like hell," Martin said. "It wouldn't be so bad if that blonde hair wasn't mixed in. You ought to have your hair cut short to get rid of it."

"I've got other things to worry about. And what the hell difference does it make to you anyhow?"

"I've been wandering around alone," Martin said, "sometimes achieving a semblance of quietness and almost happiness, but then a nerve trembles or a hand scoops a hollow in my stomach and I remember that I, Martin Gray, am a patient in a hospital for drunks."

"Wait till you've been here a few more times."

"Oh no. It is now that looms large, this day. There are six of us here for five more days, David, Helen, Ralph, Evelyn, Abbie, and Martin. Six of us cast up on a desert island of ostracism, banished by booze, and how will we act? There is nothing for us to hide from each other. Do the condemned in hell hide their sins from each other? A short time, a long time. Is there something I can do for you, Abbie? Get you some fruit juice or a cup of coffee?"

"Ah-h-h," she said, trailing her disgust and refusal.

"The *Ladies' Home Journal*?" he said with a grin.

"Ah-h-h."

"You have a rather zoological response. I'll bring you peanuts when I come back."

"Don't be such a wise guy," she said.

"It's only talk," Martin said. "Something to thwart thought and unpleasant self-recognition. I've been very lonely wandering around. It's nice to talk to you. Where do you live?"

"I have a room in Lynn."

"With a husband?"

"With nothing."

"Well, there isn't nothing," Martin said. "Nothing is an impossi-

bility unless you combine it with its opposite. I am everything and I am nothing. Ultimately there is only the paradox."

"It's a game I don't follow," she said.

"How old are you?" Martin asked.

"Thirty-two."

Martin studied her destruction, the frangible hair, the red eyes, the puffed flesh mottled like a map in inflamed relief, the scheming hardness of her facial set. Her nails were cracked in dirty cherry, and the veins on her wrists looked black. He could imagine her slouched in a dark booth in a foul-smelling beer-and-urine tavern, offering herself for enough to buy a quart of wine, for sex could mean little to her any longer. And yet, he thought, she was once beautiful.

"Ah, God!" he breathed. "You are indeed an exile like myself."

"From what?" she asked.

"From life."

"I am an exile with life," she said mysteriously.

"What does that mean?" Martin asked.

"Oh, nothing," she answered irritably. "Why don't you go out and look at the flowers and talk to the bees. What are bothering me for?"

Martin picked up her hand.

"I didn't mean to bother you, Abbie," he said. "I'm rather mixed up, that's all. But I'm not entirely unhappy and when I sat down I thought maybe I might be happier."

He stood up, still holding her hand.

"And somehow I got a little sadder. That's all. Somehow I can't stand people feeling worse than I do, and I know you've been harder hurt by booze than I."

"I don't know why they don't carry the paraldehyde for another day. Some places they give it for three days. Christ, I've got the shakes."

"Well," Martin said. "I haven't been taking all those pills they give you. I don't like taking sedatives."

He reached in his bathrobe pocket and took out what he had saved.

"What are all of them?" he asked.

Abbie stared at his hand with fascination while Martin studied her.

"The little white ones are quarter-grain phenobarbital. The next size white ones are half-grain. Those big white pills are tolserol. You should take them. They don't have dope in them and they're not

habit-forming but they quiet you down. The yellow capsules are vitamins. You should take them. The red capsules are seconal. Haven't you taken any seconal at night to sleep?"

"Only one last night. I don't like pills. I distrust them. Do you want something to put you to sleep? If it's safe, I mean. You know more about these metabolic basketballs than I do."

Abbie took one of the red capsules from his hand.

"I'll take one of these. But you really ought to take the two tolserol. They won't hurt you and they quiet apprehension."

"Ah," Martin said. "If they could only increase comprehension. I'll get some water and we'll have a little party. I like you, Abbie, only don't look so goddam sad. You break my heart."

He went into the toilet and came back with two paper cups of water.

"Abbie," he said. "You weren't on the pills along with the booze, were you?"

She smiled for the first time, but with a ghastly appearance.

"No. It's the only thing I haven't done. Take one of the vitamins too."

"I feel like a little boy offering his girl candy."

"Candy," she said.

Martin swallowed the capsule and the pills with three sips of water and Abbie took the seconal.

"Don't sit up," Martin said. "Lie down now and I'll talk to you. You know the day is beautiful outside. The leaves are drifting slowly and all the fall flowers are brilliant. Back by the stone wall are all the colours, rich, pure, delicate, strong, as you felt colours when you were a child, when colour had substance. You see, we have lost that childhood awareness and for the same reason that Adam and Eve lost paradise. We became conscious of sin and sin is a challenge leading to freedom, only we freed ourselves from that which was most dear to us. But supposing someone had taught us there, was no sin? Would we have been so perverse? There would have been no challenge, no longing to be unfettered. Most people stand on a moral staircase berating the person on the step below and sceptical of the one on the step above. But we, Abbie, we're like that French poet, whose name I forget, but who said, 'I am seated on the lowest level. I can no longer be deposed.' Perhaps in this subterranean world of ours there can be a peace that is plausible and a love that does not ask obedience. It is possible that we can escape without complete destruction and that the sum total of our depravities will be innocence."

"The words sound nice, the sense escapes me," Abbie said.

"Well, sleep then," Martin said gently. "Rest, my poor Abbie."

"Nice advice. Don't go yet!"

Abbie raised herself and looked at the sleeping women in the next beds. They had been talking in low voices. Now, even lower, she whispered hoarsely:

"I'm worried to death almost. I'm pregnant."

"Oh God, no!" Martin breathed.

"Yes," she said. "I kept drinking and drinking when I found out and I thought the booze would do it or the paraldehyde, but it's no good."

Martin went to the head of the bed and pushed a strand of her hair back. He looked down at her with a painful tender sorrow and a deep longing to comfort her.

"Don't worry," he said. "Lean on me a few days. We'll find some way to put things right. Forget it for now."

"I'm not married, you know."

"I know."

"I don't know who's to blame for it."

Martin stooped and kissed her forehead.

"Go to sleep, Abbie. Don't worry. It's nice you told someone."

## 2

In the office the old veteran nurse was sitting. It was she who was registered, her name was Mrs. Parker, and she called Martin.

"I noticed you talking to that one," she said. "Getting involved? Remember I warned you. Mr. Gray, you are an innocent man."

"Why thank you," Martin said, beaming at her.

"For what?" The old nurse glared at him.

The inexplicable wheel of emotion stopped at happiness.

"For my innocence. I thought I had lost it back there long ago."

Martin grinned broadly at her.

"Would you like a cigarette, Mrs. Parker?"

Martin lit one for the nurse and for himself. Mrs. Parker smoked in a cautious fashion, holding the cigarette delicately as though it might burn her fingers and not inhaling. Smoking, for her, was a social act. Martin was amused.

"Now," he said. "Let me put your fears to rest. I am forty-five-years old, a man who has had a certain amount of experience with both the normal and abnormal aspects of living, who has probably



been more virtuous and evil at various times than most men, whose intelligence when he is sober is not completely barren. How then can I become involved to the extent of self-injury? A man becomes involved with a woman primarily over sex, but you have only to look at Abbie Reece and see the extent of her physical degeneration to know that I have no intention of pressing passion upon her."

"She's a schemer, a faker," Mrs. Parker said.

"Well, you forget that I am an alcoholic and therefore a schemer and a faker, too."

"She'll try to arouse your better self. I know her. She's cagey. She lives by her wits."

"Maybe my better nature needs arousing. If I can help her in any way I will, even if it means a little dirtiness for myself. She has been injured, and who is to say that moral injury is less deserving of aid than physical injury?"

"Mr. Gray, your values are all twisted."

"Perhaps, perhaps. But don't you see that I have to move within the limitations of my world? I can't cling with torn hands to the high cliffs of massed normality."

Martin left and crossed the lobby to the men's ward. Both Ralph and David were sitting up, looking quite different, David pale and still shaking, as though from an angry fury, and Ralph Hilton florid but calmer. There was less than a day's difference between their last drinks.

"Is my wife awake?" David asked.

"She was asleep a while ago."

"Good. But how the hell can she sleep? She must have gotten an extra shot of crack or a goof ball from the nurse."

"From Mrs. Parker? Absurd. Somehow a woman always feels she will be taken care of. They are not as sceptical as men of nature's munificence. Therefore they sleep more readily. Who hung themselves during the depression? Not women."

"God," David said, his jaw trembling rapidly, "you sound like a d-d-d-damn fool."

Martin thought: Why do I talk so much with these two lying here filled with fear and trembling?—Hilton, who must have a wife who is furious with him, and David wondering about his job.

"Did you both eat lunch?" he asked.

David had. He was hungry. Ralph had with some effort. There was a refrigerator stocked with fruit juices in the rumpus room. Martin brought them both a glass of grapefruit juice. David drank his immediately. Ralph set the glass on his bed table.

"Drink it," David said. "You got to rehydrate yourself. Drink everything they give you."

Martin studied Ralph, feeling strangely familiar with him though he was certain he had never met him before. Then he realized that Hilton was quite like himself in appearance except that he was more solidly built and his colour was higher. They both had moustaches and dark eyes and were of the same height. Martin felt somehow uncomfortable at his discovery, as if there was some manipulation going on of which he was unaware.

"Tell me," Ralph said. "Do you think there is any use of a man like myself going to a psychiatrist?"

"I don't know," Martin said. "I've never been to one. I suppose he might be able to tell you why you drink but I don't know if that would be of any help to you. It would probably just verify the excuse you've been using. When you're a drunk, you're a drunk, and it doesn't matter really how you became one. It's just a simple fact you have to accept unless you want to die a dreary, dirty death. The only trouble with me is I find simple facts very difficult to accept. I always embroider them, and then I'm sunk."

"But it isn't simple, is it?" Ralph asked. "What about the fear of economic security, or the torture of sitting eight hours a day in a car like I do? I sell shoe linings. God!"

"What are you going to do? Those are the jobs our happy progress offers us. But the booze kills even small satisfactions that can grant some compensatory pleasure to life. The grass is no longer green; it's a million stems that have to be shaved and I'll need a couple of shots for the energy and I've smoked so much I can't smell the nice odour of the cut grass. There is no doubt that alcoholism is the worst disease of modern life because it kills everything and leaves you alive for a long time. It kills even pity and the kindness of friends which other diseases leave intact or increase. Ralph, you'll hear me talk a lot because I enjoy words, but when it comes to booze, stick to the plain facts. Have you been to any meetings?"

"Only one. The day before I came here."

"Go back again and again. It's the real hope for an alcoholic. It's a whole new way. How about you, Davey?"

"Aw, I went for a couple of months two years ago. I didn't like the people. They weren't the kind I'd ever drink with. I just didn't like them."

"Well, you didn't have to like them all. Davey, you're not a snob, are you?"

"They kept talking about God at the meetings," David said.

"I'm sure you and God could have arranged a mutual disregard for each other, Davey. Did you want to stay sober?"

David grinned. "I guess not, and if I did, I didn't know how."

"You know, Davey, it's no longer Bohemian or even very exciting to be drunk all the time. There are just too many drunks."

"What are you telling me for?"

"I'm really telling myself because I've always had that damnable desire to be different."

"Maybe you and I could have a little talk when I'm out of bed," Ralph Hilton said.

Martin looked at him with an *indefinable* uneasiness.

"Sure," he answered. "Any time."

There was something about Ralph that made Martin ashamed, as one might be facing his father or an elder brother under vaguely discreditable circumstances. The agitation was upon him again and with it a sort of exhaustion from words and thoughts, so he rose abruptly and left the men's ward.

"Be of good cheer," he said.

He could feel his hands begin to shake. As he passed the lavatory he thought of taking a couple of the phenobarbital, but then an angry rebellion against the need filled him. To hell with it, he thought. I'll fall down and die but I won't take any of those soul-destroying pills. He passed the office and went outdoors. It was his first time out. The low stone wall formed a great semicircle enclosing the rear area of the two houses of Greenleaf Hill. The flowers grew in narrow beds following it. He walked across the paved parking space and sat on the wall. The sun calmed him gently.

I'll have to do something to make me forget myself when I leave, he thought. God grant me some little understanding beyond my mind and for my heart and some love to give. Perhaps I can help some of these people here.

But as always he had that deep distrust of his own motives, the cursed conviction that he would forever fictionalize his life. I have no faith. I am the complete sceptic, sceptical even of my own scepticism. It would be better to have the deep faith of a militant atheist probably. Healthier at any rate. How could I become so completely separated from life without dying or becoming certifiable? And he remembered lying in his dark, drunken bed listening late at night to the old songs on the radio which brought back the memory of a time when he had deep convictions and dreams and hope and some kind of faith, if only in the sheer chemical vitality of things.

But I will change all that now, he thought. I will give, I will lose myself, I will shut my mind to my mind. I will declare war on pride, self-indulgence, and despair.

Sitting there in the sun Martin became St. Martin, Martin of Tours, wasn't it? who gave half his cloak to a poor man at the gates of Amiens and accepted a bishopric under protest? He became St. Martin in a dream of virtue and selflessness and abnegation and sweet charity, until a sudden cry startled him back to the stone wall and his sore buttocks. He thought rapidly: I'll always be trapped by poisonous romance. The cry came from a steep wooded slope behind the wall. He looked down and saw the laundryman lying by a tree and hastily he swung his legs over and began skittering down the hill. The laundryman was drunk. He had stumbled and rapped his head against a tree, but he was conscious and sitting up when Martin slid precariously to his side. Dismay and fear wavered under a film of sweat on the laundryman's face.

"It's gone," he said hollowly and with utter hopelessness, looking up at Martin.

"What's gone?"

"The bottle," he said in his hoarse, funereal voice, and he pointed down the steep slope.

Martin peered down through the thick brush and trees and saw the sun glinting on glass about fifty yards away. The bottle appeared to be intact.

"There it is," he said, pointing.

"Where?" the laundryman asked, his head moving back and forth like an animal finding scent. "Oh," the laundryman breathed deeply. He sat rigid and stared down at the shiny faceted bottle, the jewelled elixir.

"Well, go get it," Martin said, gasping and shaking and rather annoyed by the blind fascination on the laundryman's face. He was annoyed, too, at the effort expended for this false emergency.

The laundryman sighed. "I can't. I ain't got the strength."

"Well, go to sleep a while and then go get it."

The laundryman looked up at him with a deep reproach. His eyes were tearful and one tear was dammed by a deep pock mark on his cheekbone.

"You wouldn't do that, would you?" he pleaded as Martin turned to leave. "Go get it for me."

Martin looked up the slope to the stone wall, wondering how he could manage the climb back with his dyspnea. I'm still weak as hell, he thought.

"It ain't asking much now, is it?"

Martin drew a deep breath, thinking: If I can get back to my room, I can take a pill and lie down and maybe shut out the complications of this Christly world. Then abruptly he turned and began to descend the slope towards the bottle, sliding, then grasping a tree and resting briefly against it before continuing.

"Thank you, sir," he heard the laundryman call.

The bottle was of port wine, some unknown brand bottled locally. Martin picked it up and started back. Now he had to lean, breathing with great difficulty, against every tree he reached. He felt quite faint and began to sweat profusely. He was tempted to open the bottle and take a gulp. It was such a simple thing to do, he thought, only to climb a short way down a hill and then back again.

When he reached the stone wall again, it had rimmed the sky like the ramparts of a heavenly plateau; Martin leaned on it, gasping. He got out a handkerchief and mopped his face. His heart was beating rapidly and for an instant a fear of collapse spurted in his stomach. But he began to recover breath and he managed to get himself seated once more on the stone. He turned and looked back down at the laundryman, who was sitting in the same place and had the bottle tipped up. Calmly the laundryman lowered the bottle, screwed the cap on, stowed it in his side coat pocket, then rose and without staggering began descending the slope past the spot where Martin had retrieved the bottle.

## VIII

### 1

THE second that Martin had given her did not put Abbie Reece to sleep. It did, however, quiet the spasms that had been racking her and had the effect of lending her thoughts some degree of continuity. Martin's talk had astonished her, particularly his offer to help, and despite her surface scepticism she felt an irrational sense of relief for a time as one does after a doctor's visit. But help had become to her almost wholly a financial factor. She wondered if Martin's dark blue tailored robe was an indication of money.

Abbie had never had an abortion; indeed, she had never been

pregnant; and the prospect of such an act was deeply frightening, not the physical details of it, but the vague and portentous implications. It seemed part of an inexorable pattern, a repeated motif which this time would carry to a final climax. Drunkenness, infidelity, divorce, promiscuity, the suicide attempt. And now, drunkenness, divorce, promiscuity, pregnancy, abortion, death. It was not death particularly that caused fear as much as the forged chain of circumstances which induced an impotent, suffocating labour which she knew would be of no avail. She had lost volition and was unaware of resignation; she lived in purgatory.

Two months ago there had been a faint flicker of desire for more than this blind following of fate. She had been broke and had needed something to drink badly, and on the promise of a half-pint and a ten-dollar loan, she had gone to an AA meeting with a woman who lived next door to the house where she rented a room. It had been her first meeting and she was half-drunk, but she had retained the feeling that here was a way of escape. She did not gain any positive hope or longing but only the undefined knowledge that she could throw herself upon these people and let them take care of her, that they would not condemn and would not require a tortuous repentance. But two things had interfered with any further development of this feeble impulse. She had gotten drunk with the ten dollars and had found herself for three days and nights in a motel with a man whom she did not know very well, and after she had returned to her room and had begun tapering off, she had found that her sponsor next door had moved to another city to take a job.

She had neither the courage nor the strength to attend a meeting by herself, but the thought of AA began to vex her mind. She knew that there was something in connection with it that should be valuable to her but she couldn't quite grasp it. She had already begun to worry about pregnancy, she was over a week late, and furthermore she had only the twenty dollars that she had managed to get from her three-day companion. At two o'clock in the morning the solution came to her: the use to which AA could be put. She got up, took three fast drinks, breaking the schedule of her tapering off in favour of a steady hand, and sat down to write a letter to her first husband. It was an eloquent plea for help in which she stated that she had joined Alcoholics Anonymous and that she had for the first time in her life been filled with a beautiful hope and courage and had recognized and accepted at last her blame and responsibility for all the evil and misfortune which had almost destroyed her life. She asked for one hundred dollars as a last gesture of under-

standing from him, and would he wish her luck in her long struggle to fight back to health and sanity.

Abbie was surprised that she had remembered so many words and phrases from that one AA meeting. When she read the letter over, she liked it so well that she copied it twice and sent it to her second and third husbands. Then she took a big hooker and went to sleep. She felt no twinge of guilt at her duplicity. It was a simple matter of expediency, of being smart, a good scheme.

And it worked. Oddly, though, the money given was almost in proportion to the diminishing value received by her three husbands. Her first husband, who had received a good measure of her body, mind, and soul, such as it was, sent the one hundred dollars. He had really loved her. Her second husband, who had enjoyed her cleverness and her inordinate passion, had sent seventy-five dollars. And her third husband, a middle-aged man who had been motivated almost solely by a grasping pornographic sexuality, had sent fifty. Thus it would seem that in Abbie the value of the body equalled the total of the mind and soul.

Two hundred and twenty-five dollars, a veritable windfall. Her first impulse was to buy a supply of liquor but she knew this would lead to a big bender and the nagging fear of pregnancy was making her cautious and depressed. It was now two weeks and doubt was deferring to certainty. She drank normally for ten days, which meant for her a pint of whisky and a half-dozen bottles of beer spaced along between one sleep and the next. For breakfast she had a shot and a bottle of beer and then went to a cafeteria for toast and coffee. Every other day she had also one egg.

She was well aware of the danger of malnutrition so at three or four in the afternoon she had a bowl of pea soup and some crackers. She wondered why it was that green-pea soup was the only kind she could hold down.

She didn't, however, think of her life as particularly unfortunate at this point, excepting the possible pregnancy. She had money for booze and a bed and her values had long ago lost the comparative quality that might have caused her deep dissatisfaction. In one way her pregnancy was a help to her. It was so frightening in prospect that all other fears became impotent in contrast, and her sexual desires were dead.

She went barelegged and didn't wash her underwear. When it became soiled she bought some more in a dime store and stuffed the dirty pieces in a bureau drawer. She bought no clothes. Clothes cost too much. Unconsciously, she was saving a hundred dollars for

Greenleaf Hill. She was afraid to take a bath for some reason which she did not understand. Perhaps it would have reminded her of a cleanliness she had lost. Perhaps it was a dislike for the mere physical effort involved, which would have no relation to drinking. She ate, slept, walked, and breathed only for the purpose of continued drinking.

The end this time was approaching more swiftly and with less enjoyment than ever before and the detail was more desperate, the effort more weighted, the duration unrelieved by any momentary hope or distant resolution. One evening it was extremely hot and the thought of sitting sweatily in the usual tavern, submerged in the motionless smoke and fumes, dismayed her. She had been having difficulty breathing that day. After lunch she had thrown up the pea soup and had knocked herself out with a half-pint of whisky so that she had been unconscious for three hours. At suppertime she slipped out and got a half-dozen bottles of cold beer. These she drank while waiting for the sun to set. When it was dark she folded a blanket and walked down to the beach, four blocks away. She bought six cans of beer and a pint of whisky to take along.

The benches on the low bluff along the beach were all occupied. She went down a flight of steps and walked along in the loose, warm sand by the retaining wall of the bluff. Here and there groups of people were gathered on the beach and some youths were racing and tussling in the darkness. She found a deserted area and spread the blanket by the wall. She sat down and opened a can of beer and the whisky. She took a sip of beer, then a gulp of whisky, then a long drink of beer, after which she leaned back against the wall and stared out over the dark quiet sea. A low moon marked a silver path along the wet sand where the tide was just beginning to flood. Foam rolled gently along the path. The air was absolutely still. The stars were fixed. Voices and shouts were muted but occasionally the tide carried the cry of a gull, urgent and demanding.

She could have died at this moment and it would have been just. She was aware of nothing new that life had to offer beyond intensifying, if it was possible, the sterile degradation and suffering she was already experiencing. She loved no one. She knew of no one who was even fond of her.

Reece was her maiden name. Abigail Reece, after a grandmother. The thought of anyone by the name of Abigail being a drunk had once amused her. Now she thought of herself as a drunk. Now she knew that she was an alcoholic. But the thought of doing anything about it dismayed and frightened her. She knew she would die a



drunk. There was nothing to put in its place. To be anything else would require an effort beyond her capabilities. And what would she exchange it for? The monotony of housework or an office job, or piecework in a factory? To serve a dull man returning from work a dull meal, as dull as the evening paper he would read afterward, with an uncomprehending peering at little black letters that told of scandals she had already lived? And, anyway, her looks were shot and any man she could get would be merely someone paying the way in exchange for a lubricity called love, and she would be unfaithful with the first man who carried himself a little more proudly and desired her.

So she sat against the stone wall drinking alone in the darkness and knowing that this was the start of the bender. She was supposed to menstruate the next day, a month late, and maybe the booze would do it. How could such a thing happen to me, me? she asked herself with a shattering bewilderment. It seemed impossible that her body could procreate. She was certain that the growth would be some hideous excrescence.

In the distance now a portable radio was softly emitting an old tune she herself had often played on the piano. For a time, before the booze had inscribed her face, she had had a job playing in one of those dark cocktail lounges where a piano softly swathes sex and whisky in a cocoon of fathomless, sad, gentle nescience. It was "Body and Soul," which the more pretentious and snobbish drunks had always liked. Quickly Abbie took a long draw on the bottle. The tone of the saxophone reaching sorrowfully for a note hidden somewhere behind the veil of reality was a terrible sound for her, epitomizing the hopeless, destructive longing and exaggeration of almost sixteen years.

The dam broke and despair came swirling through in gnarled sobs and tangled sorrow as Abbie lay weeping on the blanket. If, at this moment, some sharp, clean method had presented itself she would have taken her life. There was nothing but the whisky, a protracted way of death, a sweaty, toilsome, whittling away of the knotted, thorny, apocryphal mass of life. She drank again, wept, drank, until she fell, trembling and shaken, into the false death of a coma, lying there on the beach with the beauty of the night above and beyond her.

When she awoke her clothes were damp, the flesh of her thighs adhered sweatily, spittle seeped from the corner of her mouth. Her eyes opened as through powdered stone, like some lizard pushing blindly up through an avalanche. The night was still warm, but

darker now. No sounds drifted along the beach. Without moving she peered cautiously about, then slowly she sat upright, pawing her face and pushing her hair back. She took inventory. There were two cans of beer and one drink left in the pint. She drank the whisky first and then the two cans of beer. She stood up with only one thought in mind, to get more to drink. She made her way secretively along the retaining wall, leaving the blanket where it was. The thought of police worried her now. When she reached the street she crossed it quickly, walking straight, feigning a normal purpose in her determined pace.

By a railroad overpass there was a taxi company. The street was empty except for two cabs parked outside the dark office. She pushed open the door and stepped inside. A man tipped his chair down from the wall and leaned forward into the dim light seeping in from the street. A radio was playing softly.

"Hi," the man said cautiously.

"Do you know where I can get a bottle?" Abbie asked. "I need a drink. I'm sick."

"What do you mean, you're sick?"

"Just sick. I need a drink."

"No. The town's closed down. The cops are watching that stuff. There's no place to get anything. Why don't you go home and sleep it off?"

Another man now rose from a couch at the rear of the dark office.

"What does she want?" he asked.

"Something to drink."

"What's the matter, you in tough shape?" he asked, coming forward.

"I'm sick. I can't sleep. If I could get a drink, I could get some rest. I'm dead. I need sleep."

"All right, all right, take it easy," the second man said. "The only place I know to get a bottle is out to the Glen View Motel on the turnpike. They run a cocktail lounge and the desk clerk will sell you a fifth, high-priced. You'll have to take a room, too."

"I've got money," Abbie said. "I can sleep there. Will you take me?"

"All right. Get in the first cab."

On the way Abbie took the one hundred dollars she had separated from the rest of her money and put it in her brassiere as a precaution. She began to feel feverish and faint and she leaned her head back and closed her eyes. It took twenty minutes through the de-

served streets and over the dark highway to reach the motel. The taxi stopped at the office.

"Here you are," the driver said.

"Come on in with me, will you?" Abbie asked. "Tell him what I want. I've never been here before."

"All right," the driver said. "You'll have to sign the register, though."

"I can sign it."

Inside the office a weasel-faced young man was looking at a magazine. He stood up with an air of importance. The driver knew him.

"Can you fix this lady up with a room?" he asked.

The young man looked at Abbie's face, then lowered his eyes to her shoes and up again.

"It's six dollars in advance," he said, walking behind a counter.

Abbie put the money on the green blotter, took a registration card, and signed Ruth Hallowell with a Boston address. She did this without thought, as she had many times before. Ruth Hallowell was the name of a girl who had been in the fifth grade with her and who had since died. The clerk picked up the card.

"Mrs. Hallowell, is it?" he said with a faint, offensive doubt.

"Look, she'd like to buy a fifth," the driver said.

The clerk looked at Abbie with a stare that by a kind of complete inexpression registered his contempt.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Anything," Abbie said. "Any whisky."

"It's eight dollars."

Abbie glanced quickly at him but put the money on the counter without comment.

"Take number twenty, the last one down on the left. I'll bring the bottle." The clerk put a key on the counter.

The driver left the office with Abbie.

"Get in the cab and I'll back down," he said.

Inside the room, Abbie asked him what the fare amounted to.

"Two dollars."

She gave him three.

"It's only two," he said.

"That's a tip."

"You'll need it more than me," the driver said, putting the extra dollar on the bureau. "I'll get a cut from the clerk."

"Don't go till he brings the fifth," Abbie pleaded as the driver reached for the door.

She was listening intently for the sound of the clerk's step.

She heard the step and opened the door quickly. The clerk entered, closed the door, and took a bottle from under his coat. Abbie began immediately to open it. The two men watched her. She poured a drink in a glass on the bureau.

"You have to be out at noon," the clerk said, his face set with scorn.

Abbie stared at him a moment and swallowed the drink.

"Don't forget," he added.

"Will you come and get me?" Abbie asked the driver.

"One of the boys will."

"At noon."

"I'll make sure you're out," the clerk said.

Abbie whirled to face him, at bay now.

"Who's asking you to make sure of anything?" she cried with a terrible, frantic indignation. "What the hell are you sneering at, you thin-faced, narrow son of a bitch? What great heroic act have you performed that you can look down your brown nose at anyone?"

"Take it easy," the driver said.

"Maybe you'd like to leave now," the clerk said.

"Maybe you'd like me to testify in court that you sold me a fifth of cheap whisky for eight dollars at two in the morning? You're cheaper than your booze. You want to put me out? Try it. As sick as I am, I'll break your goddam neck."

The clerk regarded her a moment, then said, "Just be out of here by noon, that's all," and left.

Abbie threw herself on the bed and began cursing softly. She wanted to weep but no tears would come.

"I'm going now," the driver said. "I wish there was something I could do."

"There's nothing to do," Abbie said. "Thanks for helping me."

The driver closed the door softly as if afraid of waking someone or disturbing a patient.

## 2

And now here was this Martin. There was something soft and vulnerable about him and yet he appeared strong and sure of himself. She did not know if she was repelled or attracted. She had not understood him completely but had sensed an underlying yearning for human warmth and sympathy. But what could he do? Did he

have money? She had no illusions about her own nature or looks. She was a schemer and a hag. She knew this. Martin wasn't seeing her as a woman. Unless she had a base, perverted attraction for him? He was too intelligent not to know what he was doing. What was his angle? He had kissed her forehead. A saintly bastard? But a drunk, too? No. What did he want? You had to want something and she could see nothing in herself that anyone would desire for any reason. Even if he ran a whorehouse or had a racket she was of no use to him. Aw, she thought, he wants to help, let him help.

She heard a footstep in the lobby and raised up, thinking that it might be Martin and she could ask for another seconal. It was Andy, the maintenance man. She lay down, thinking seconal, seconal. In a few moments she fell uneasily asleep.

Between the women's and men's wards was a long narrow room that served as a dispensary. Doors that were always kept locked opened into both wards. It was the sound of the nurse unlocking the door from the women's ward that woke Abbie. As she opened her eyes she saw the back of the nurse as she was reaching up to turn on the overhead light. The light flooded her sterile figure and suddenly the phone in the office began to ring in short, urgent peals. Abbie became instantly alert. She did not plan her moves but acted with a blind opportunism. The nurse, who had put her keys in her pocket, hurried into the lobby. It was the young nurse, not Scottie or Mrs. Parker, who would have known better. As the nurse reached the door to the lobby, Abbie was already out of bed. Six or seven steps took her to the dispensary. There were all the jars of pills and the gallon jugs of paraldehyde and in the middle of the lower shelf, isolated like more expensive merchandise, the large square jar three-quarters filled with bright red capsules. A candy counter, Abbie thought, almost giggling. She glanced back quickly. Helen and Evelyn were asleep. Her pyjamas had a breast pocket. She opened the jar. It had a wide mouth. She put two handfuls of the capsules in her pocket, screwed the cover back on the jar, snapped up a paper napkin, and hurried back to bed. With her eyes shut and the covers pulled over her shoulders, she began to wrap the seconal in the napkin. The nurse came running back, shut and locked the door of the dispensary, and returned to the office. Abbie stuffed the napkin full of capsules into her pillow case.

She had a feeling of safety, a refuge to which she could retreat and in which she could hide when the hounds of desolation in derrier bay closed in. But not yet, not yet. The silence of the hospital

cast a net of profound silence over her as she lay in a fetal curve with her palms pressed between her upraised knees and her head bowed. She shivered exquisitely, then she raised up and reached for the water on her bed table. Cautiously she extracted one of the capsules and swallowed it.

Rest, my poor Abbie, he had told her. We'll find some way, he had promised. She had her way. She wished she could tell him. She wished he would wander in now and she could tell him that she was warm and secure and happy so that maybe he could wander out again less sorrowful. Or if he wept she could hold him close and put his head on her breast and comfort him with the knowledge that there was peace and reconciliation. And gently she could love him as though he were a defenceless youth. My dear one, she said in the second twilight, we'll live by the sea. All day the waves will sing and in the night I'll hold you, just hold you, till the sun is on your eyes. She fell asleep again with a beautiful fantasy of giving and loving, a dream she had never consciously had, but which rose now, up through the opaque, diluent depths of her being.

## IX

### 1

RALPH HILTON watched the blank white wall, realizing that soon he would have to call the nurse and ask to telephone the company to save a job he loathed. It was an action he feared as much as he had ever feared anything, and he was not a brave man. For quite a number of years he had borne himself with a certain confidence and he was not physically afraid, but his life had become an avoidance of decision. He knew this. He knew, also, that he possessed an imposing façade from behind which peeped his unrelinquished youth. In the surface social world he was often dishonest and evasive but deep within himself he had a terrifyingly clear portrait of himself performing his shoddy deeds on the bright screen of his private theatre. Ralph knew himself well. He had struggled alone to change himself with one secret resolution after another, each of them broken with slowly increasing damage. He wanted an order and a routine from which to view the world with a serene interest; he could never adhere to the moderation that might make this possible

nor did he have the courage to change the conditions that prevented the longed-for moderation.

For the past five years he had driven an average of forty thousand miles a year, calling on shoe factories in New England, and there had always been a bottle under the driver's seat. Sometimes he had not touched the bottle for several weeks, but if it had not been there he would have been seized with nervous fear, for he knew, he was certain that some crisis, some physical illness or mental strain would come during which he would need the calm reassurance of a drink. Peculiarly, if anything in the nature of a real crisis arose, he did not drink for then he was afraid that the whisky would distort his judgment and that the act of drinking would invalidate his decision. He opened the bottle on the waves of depression and exhilaration.

Ralph Hilton had come to believe in his own failure and in these moments he believed it to be a matter of money, as did his wife and most of his neighbours, who felt he had not achieved the station that his height, his appearance, and his voice indicated he should. So he dreamed of wealth. He played a game. As he drove along he counted the auto licences of various states or the bridges he crossed. For each different state or bridge his income was increased a thousand dollars a year. He liked the bridges best because they were more numerous. As his imaginary income rose he planned carefully various changes in his life.

His dream was a mixture of kindness and vindictiveness. It began with a loving delight at Anne's sparkling happiness at this new and incredible riches, it progressed to a bitter realization that without possessions, luxurious, prideful possessions, marriage was a fraud, and to a burning resentment that his wife had reduced marriage to such niggardly proportions. But it was more than his wife, finally. It was his employment, it was the whole of modern life. He felt himself the victim of unknown forces, vast manipulations that went on in the business and editorial offices of the Luce and other publications, in laboratories, in Washington. He was the spiritual slave of the advertising departments of General Motors and Du Pont and Leavitt Brothers. Once in a drunken moment he had a vision of the revolution, not coming from the Communists, but rising up from the husbands who had been prostituted for possessions, who had been led into slavery by the glazed paper, multicoloured pimps of business and applied science.

It was nearly suppertime when Ralph began to think of the phone call he had to make to his employer, but he began to question himself so that the time and opportunity would pass and his delay would be not without justification. First of all he asked himself if he should lie. Since his employer knew nothing of the proportions of his drinking, he reported to the factory for only a half-day every second week; the lie would be plausible. Yet he was really weary of lies and longed for a radical truth. Would truth hurt his wife and children by robbing him of the chance to provide for them? He told himself that this was the important point. He sank down in bed a little and then fell into a remembrance of the days when he had been a day labourer, the days of the depression, when he had come home happily tired and his wife had desired little but food and a bed and laughter and his physical strength and passion.

Anyway, he thought, I am away from work without permission. Perhaps he would be fired? A moment of exhilaration seized him. Oh God, let me be fired, he murmured. What then? He saw his family in a humble home on some hill and himself returning at twilight from his day's work, no television, no mortgage, no nefarious neighbours nibbling at his manhood, only Anne and his children waiting happily for him in the darkening quietness outside the warm light of home. Hadn't it been that way once? A few moments' calmness allowed him respite for his dream but then once again the awareness of where he was and what he had become came surging back. The phone call. He would call his boss at his home that evening. It would give him a few more hours for recovery.

The nurse wheeled in the wagon with supper. It was Scottie in her state of perpetual exhilaration. God, to be so healthy, Ralph thought.

"Ah, Mr. Hilton, Mr. Le Grand, supper, supper!" Scottie exclaimed.

"Jesus," David murmured, rolling over and raising himself on his elbow. "The hearty man ate a condemned supper," he said out loud.

"Now, now, that isn't nice," Scottie said, smiling. "It's good healthy food."

Ralph raised the metal cover from his plate and stared at the grey adifference of meat loaf, some pasty mashed potatoes, some dying tomatoes on a wreath of lettuce. He forced himself to taste the meat.



"Now you have to eat," Scottie said. "Eat and sleep, that's what does it."

"Even a paraldehyde gravy would improve this," David said.

Scottie laughed and retreated. Ralph swallowed a sickening mass.

"You have to joke," David said. "But then, this food is beyond joking."

"I'm worried about calling my boss."

"So?" David said. "I have to call my boss, too. Does your boss know your booze problem?"

"No. I see him only a half-day every other week."

"What a job for an alky! So you've got chronic gastritis. Is that bad? You're in for observation. It's a crime to waste hunger on food like this."

"I wish I could quit. I'm fed up with the job."

"At a time like this you don't decide. You just cover up."

"Christ, I can't stomach it," Ralph said, pushing his tray away.

"I'm shaking so much I can't hold mashed potatoes on my fork," said David.

"What can happen to me, really?" Ralph asked. "If worst comes to worst, I can still go back labouring." He was silent a moment. "I don't really want anything, I guess," he said. "There are just all the things I don't want. You're lucky to have your wife here. At least you don't have to go through a long drawn-out retribution."

Ralph sank down in bed and stared at the ceiling. At least I'll be going home sober, he thought. Maybe this is an end. Maybe now some big new thing will come, some great change. Maybe Anne will see what's happening to us and we can retreat, sell the house, something, move somewhere. A little business together. A bookstore with small gifts and greeting cards. They would be together and she wouldn't have that feeling of being left out that caused her to make sarcastic cracks every morning when he left for work. She always felt that anything he did apart from her diminished their marriage, even his having to leave the house to make a living, so the simple solution was to work together. Ralph became quite entranced with his idea, quite certain that it offered the resolution of all their antagonism. It had a very practical aspect too. Anne would be constantly near him to see that he did not drink. But no, he would feel no need then.

### 3

In the rumpus room Martin was eating the nameless food and listening to the maintenance man recite a long story of Prohibition

days. The story had all the standard props: gangsters, pasting false labels on bottles, needled beer, the peephole in the door, the raccoon-coated college boy getting in a fight. Besides trying to separate the exaggeration from outright falsification in the story, Martin was wondering how many alcoholics could be traced directly to Prohibition and its repeal.

He walked out and the maintenance man shook his head sadly. Evelyn will be awake, Martin thought. He sought people now in that happy anticipation with which he had once opened a new book. In the ward the three women had finished eating. Martin was astonished at Evelyn. Her blue eyes were clear, her skin pale and firm, her hair softly lighted in disarray. She was sitting up and her breasts were prominent, even under the shapeless hospital johnny. But she looked frightened and sad.

"Hi, Martin," Helen said. Abbie stared at him.

"Good evening," he said solemnly.

He leaned on the foot of Evelyn's bed and gazed at her with awe.

"Lord," he breathed. "Just a rose in a devil's garden."

"Ah, cut out the clowning," Helen said. "What's new?"

"Well, all afternoon I've been hard at work on the formation of a new political party. It's to be called the Coma-Capitalists or the Capa-Communists. I haven't decided yet which. It's a matter of which direction the most strength will come from. The new party will be a synthesis of all the disturbing political elements in the world today. Very simple, really. Are you married?" he asked Evelyn.

"Yes," she said without smiling, almost frightened.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Evelyn," Helen said.

Martin went to Abbie and picked up her hand.

"How does it go now?" he asked.

She shrugged, looking at him without response. Martin's face assumed a contemplative look.

"But it will be all right," he said. "Can't you be a little happy now?"

"Happy," Abbie said, twisting her mouth wryly. Her hand within Martin's trembled. He pressed it and then went back to stand by the dispensary door so that the three women were all in range of his vision.

"You've still got the shakes," Helen, who was watching him, said.

"Remorse reverberating. The nerve strings of my harp picked by sharp regret."

"You?" Evelyn said. "I don't believe it."

"What do you think he is, some special kind of a drunk?" Abbie responded.

"I don't know much about drunks," Evelyn said softly.

"You didn't get here drinking malted milk."

"I mean I drank at home all the time."

"She hid her bottles in her gym bloomers," Helen said. "Don't mind us, Evelyn. Maybe we're just a little jealous that we look so beat up and you look so innocent and fresh."

Martin rubbed his hand over his forehead wearily as a momentary dizziness seized him.

"What's the matter?" Abbie asked.

He smiled slightly as he looked at her.

"I guess I'm still on the elevator."

"The waves," Helen said.

"Why don't you sit down awhile?" Abbie asked.

The women now were deeply concerned for him, forgetting their own misery, the quivering stomach and the shaded mind, seeking the release of a pity outside themselves, crying silently for a form to hold, a life to which they could become attached.

"You look pale," Abbie said.

"You're sure you're all right?" Helen asked.

"Girls, girls, I can hear you down there. Come upstairs this minute! Do you hear? Do you understand? This very minute!"

"Poor Sarah," Helen said gently. "She'll die in a chronic defence of virginity."

The flute began to play now, for once assuming the correct tempo at the outset. This evening it achieved an unbelievable sweetness, a firm melody, a correct stressing. They listened through the first chorus silently.

"'Beautiful Dreamer,' " Evelyn said.

"He was an alky like us," said Helen.

"Both the composer and the artist," Martin said.

And the melody was repeated, sad and haunting. The electric light flickered and seemed to soften. Martin stood motionlessly as the song wove the past of a time farther back than the womb, back into his mother's youth, then forward into his mother's drunken humming as she rocked in her chair and he crouched wide-eyed and afraid. How long ago did it all start? he asked himself. And the sins of the father? Then why should I writhe in moral responsibility? God, let me rest. "Do You Remember Sweet Alice, Ben Bolt?" What a frightful melancholy possessed the song of a dead era.

He walked to Abbie's bed and bent to kiss her forehead. He could smell the loathsome odour of paraldehyde that still clung to her.

"It will be all right," he said. "Be a little happy. Don't make me so sad."

He went around to Evelyn's side and kissed her, too.

"You really are lovely," he said. "Don't ever come back."

To Helen he said, after kissing her, "It's not all clowning, you know."

"I know," she said. "Say good night to Davey for me and tell him I'll see him in the morning."

"I almost wish one of you were my wife," Martin said.

He carried his disconsolate self across the lobby, each step a unit of time; and entered the men's ward.

"Hi," David and Ralph said in unison, with obvious relief.

"Helen sends her love and will be happy to see you in the morning," Martin said to David. "Hello, Ralph."

"What does my wife send, I wonder?"

"How are you feeling now?"

"Not so shaky. I hate this bed and the sheets. I've never been in bed for two whole days."

"A warm body, not your own, and cool sheets," Martin said. "A fifth and infidelity. What misery and error abound in the bedroom and the bottle. How tragic that the longing for love has led us to both."

"It wasn't that with me," Ralph said. "It was just the worry, just the worry about what my family would have. Just that I wouldn't have, I couldn't have, all the money to buy all the things. Each item was a failure. I want to get out of it. I can't lie and crawl any more."

"Aw," David said in disgust. "Tell them all to go to hell."

"But wasn't that what you really wanted?" Martin asked Ralph. "Love? To have your wife say that she loved you, even in failure, even in sin, even in the dark, dismal loneliness of the drunken soul? To say, perhaps, that she could not live without you so that in you the strength would come flooding back to comfort her wounded soul? One borrows strength from the weak, not the strong. Oh god-dam this modern world in which men and women are constantly flexing their muscles."

"I have to call my boss," Ralph said.

"Me, too," David said. "I've got the gripe."

"I work in a government office," Martin said. "I've known the chief administrative assistant for twenty years. I'm on sick leave."

"What can happen, really?" Ralph said. "I'll tell him I'm a drunk. I'm in a drying out hospital. What can he do, fire me? That's all. I can't be sent to jail for it. Eat? Everybody eats somehow. My kids? Who knows, maybe they would be better off with a little suffering and hardship. My wife? The only thing she knows is to beat me over the head with her virtue and the things she lacks."

Martin looked at him sadly. He looks like me but he is not me, he thought.

"Don't make an erratic decision," he said. "Forget the wife and children for now. What do you think, Davey?"

"All I know is, don't throw away a good job till you've got another."

"Do you and your wife argue much?" Martin asked Ralph.

"All the time. Lots of times in silence. We don't speak for weeks. The house is no good, she says, it's a dump. Actually, it's a good six-room Dutch Colonial house. I redecorated all the rooms. She says our kids don't have what others have, that I deprive them some way. But I've spent very little drinking because I never drank in the bar-rooms. Our children have what others have in the neighbourhood and a hell of a lot more than kids in some other neighbourhoods. They have bicycles and toys and good clothes and take dancing lessons. We have a summer camp with a lake front and a row-boat. What more can I do? We have two radios and a television set. We don't owe any bills. The car is paid for. And yet it isn't enough for her somehow. She can always mention so many things we don't have—new bedspreads, new drapes, an electric stove. Christ, it drives me crazy, until I begin to believe I'm the most miserable failure in the world. Yet I know it isn't so. But I can't relax at home."

"Truth can be cruel and even dishonest at times," said Martin. "What is the difference between nineteen and twenty lies? You may do irreparable damage to your wife and children because of a narrow longing to relieve your conscience."

"Don't be a goddamn fool," David said. "I'm making my call now."

He rose from bed. His voice had sounded strong and confident but now his jaw began to tremble and his whole body shook for a few steps as he crossed the ward.

"The phone call," Martin murmured. "The first resumption of relations with the outside world from which we have fled. Like the visit to the principal's office as a child, but how much worse, weighted down with twenty-five years of accumulated guilt."

"Christ, I dread it," Ralph said. "I'm pretty sure I'll get fired."

"Wouldn't it be better to quit when you're cold sober?" Martin asked, looking narrowly at him.

"I didn't say I didn't want the job."

"No," Martin said. "But aren't you trying to push a catastrophe, really? Are you sure it isn't fear and revenge spurring you on? Are you translating resentment into terms of moral righteousness? We can be very blind to our real motives, Ralph. I know I am. Right now you can make a terrible display of strength if you want, do the Samson act, and bring down the edifice of your home and marriage. Is that what you really want?"

"I want something that is clean and decent, that's all."

"Wait a month and we'll talk it over again. Pick up a little strength. Float along for a few days. We'll joke a little and talk and try to enjoy them and get rid of our burden of remorse. Everything isn't so tragic, Ralph."

David returned and climbed into bed. He grinned broadly and wiped his forehead.

"How did it go?" Ralph asked.

"Man, I lied like a trooper and trouted like a liar. I'm safe."

"My turn now," Ralph said, climbing out of bed and trembling.

"You're not on your way to an execution chamber," Martin said, walking along with him. "It's only a phone booth. What can happen, really? Your fears are only vapours floating over the surface of your mind. Here's some change."

Several times Ralph tried to put a coin in the slot but his hand shook too much. Martin put it in for him. Ralph gave his number and waited.

"Put in thirty-five cents," he whispered to Martin. The coins clanged softly.

"Hello, Harry? Ralph Hilton," he said heartily, self-assured, a salesman. "Man, what a time! I almost passed out over in Webster so I went home and saw the doctor and here I am in the hospital for observation. Damn! Seems like I'm anaemic and have to stay in bed a week getting injections. No, I've been feeling a little weak and nervous, that's all. My blood pressure is a little down and they're building that up, too. There's nothing important on with my customers and I'll be out again next week. Thanks, Harry. I'll be all right. I got run down this way once before, about six years ago."

Martin listened with amazement as the fabrication was spun. He began laughing softly. Ralph emerged from the phone booth, sweating profusely.

"What a performance," Martin said. "All salesmen have corrugated souls."

"Jesus!" Ralph said. "Am I glad that's done! What a load off my back. Listen, get me a cup of coffee from the rumpus room, will you?"

## X

### 1

THE next day became a wandering and a talking and a staring and a sharing of secrets. They were welded into an entity within which were smaller entities in this strange world on the hilltop in the bright September sunshine, all gold and green and flecked with multi-coloured flowers and leaves. On the far horizon was the arc of the bridge, a span that seemed an eternally fixed promise of some sort. There were no clouds overhead. The clouds were within themselves, an apprehension suddenly shading the forgetfulness, the fear darkening hope, the depression blanketing the laughter that was once again let loose by sedation. Emotionally, they were naked. Revelations and friendships grew in a climate of unrestrained yearning and dependence. The group gathered and split, talked in a loud crossfire and broke into double whispers. Martin was an observer at times. At other times his mind probed and sought for meaning. He knew that his life had reached a climax and was even now in a state of reformation. It was an ending, he hoped, the thing they all sought, the triple yearning for surcease, a final healing of the multiple cleavage, a receiving of grace.

But then his mind and will would thresh again in wounded contortions. We made a decision to turn our lives and wills over to God as we understood Him. Was a bare decision enough, then? All right, I have decided. But there was that supplementary step. We sought through prayer and meditation to increase our conscious contact with God. He was afraid of both the humiliation and egotism of prayer. At this moment Abbie came wandering towards him.

She looked much smaller in the open. Her hands were jammed in the pockets of her bathrobe, which was tied sacklike around her waist. There was a lingering grace in her walk, some faint trace of the pride with which she had once approached a man.

"Hello, Abbie," Martin said.

She stood beside him and looked at the bridge and shuddered. Her face was painful.

"I can't stand the distance," she said.

"No. Sometimes it's frightening. Sit down awhile."

"No. I have to keep moving. As long as I can."

"Would you like me to walk with you?"

"No. Today is the big day of the shakes for me. I have to keep thinking that a week from now it will be all over."

He looked into her eyes, around her eyes, at her mouth, trying to read an inscription of her mind or heart. There was nothing but the apparent decay. But he knew she was hugging something to her. The air of despair had changed subtly, a softer and more final despair. He sat down where he was and Abbie left him, descending the slope of the lawn to the far corner where Evelyn and Helen were standing by a row of pines. She looked back twice at him as she walked away. Once she hesitated as if to return.

Ralph and David came out of the building and sat down beside him.

"Nice out," David said.

"I'll have to call my wife today," said Ralph. "There's the women."

"Look at the three of them," Martin said. "Isn't it strange, the three of them in a feminine entity, laughing a little and knowing each other and maybe feeling some love? If only we could see moments like these as complete, whole, separate, and forget the strained continuity. To isolate the object and the movement and forget the implication. That would be freedom. Aren't they beautiful?"

"Beautiful!" Ralph exclaimed.

"Christ, how you talk," David said.

"Oh, I know the bloodshot eyes and sloppy bathrobes are there, but so is the movement and the structure. Sometimes I think the thing we have suffered from most is the loss of simple sensuous enjoyment."

The three women moved off across the lawn, wandering, first one leading, then another. The sunlight and shadow fell on them and on a laugh and a word that carried faintly across the open. The tall trees made them smaller and more distant. After a time they approached the men and reality loomed. Martin saw Abbie's stricken eyes, the hound-dog sadness of Helen, the quiet fright of Evelyn.



"Oh, come," he chided. "Not so sad, now, not so sad. It's profane, really, on a day like this."

"What's to be happy about?" Helen asked, slumping to the grass.

"When there's your wife to call," Ralph added.

"Or your husband may come," Evelyn said.

"When the whole world is waiting down there at the foot of the hill," Abbie said.

Martin leaned over and began petting Evelyn's hair. She smiled at him.

"Like a kitten in the sun," he said.

He saw Abbie watching him with a corrupt and spiteful glare. She thinks I'm making a play for Evelyn.

"Come on, Abbie. Have a cup of coffee with me," he said.

He did not wait for her assent. He rose and seized her hands and pulled her to her feet. Then he walked across the lawn with one hand on her farther shoulder, walking somewhat bent so that his face would be nearer hers as he talked. Mrs. Parker was standing like a barrier to the porch entrance. Martin steered Abbie around her and smiled. Mrs. Parker nodded curtly at him.

In the rumpus room, sitting across the table from him, Abbie asked, "Do you mean all you say?"

"I guess so, Abbie," he said.

"Do you remember what you told me the other day?"

"Yes, I remember. Why?"

"Nothing."

"Go ahead, talk."

"No, there's nothing for me to talk about to you. Just forget what I said, that's all. I don't want to talk about it any more."

"But you're in trouble——"

"I'm not in trouble any more. I just don't want to talk about it."

"Whatever you say, Abbie."

"I wish I knew what your angle is."

"I haven't any angle, Abbie. At least not what is commonly called an angle."

"I haven't got any angles left, either," she said. "It's all done."

There was that secretive note of self-pity in her voice, Martin noticed. What was she scheming now? He did not believe she had menstruated. In such a case her relief would have been pronounced and apparent. Had she selected a victim who could be coerced? All he could do, really, was to watch her until something developed. He could not force her into the open, especially now that the effects

of the paraldehyde had worn off and her being was once more assuming its protective shell.

"Promise me one thing," he said. "If you need help and I can help you, let me."

"I'm going upstairs now," she said.

## 2

David and Ralph went in for coffee and Helen was left with Evelyn.

"Do you have any children?" she asked.

"Two. A boy and a girl, eleven and a half and ten. Do you?"

"Yeah. A boy of twelve from a first marriage. You weren't drinking long, were you? You could have shaken it out at home."

"I could have, maybe, but Robert, my husband, wouldn't have helped and I would have kept on. I didn't know much about it. A woman from AA brought me here."

"How did you start drinking? You said you didn't run around much."

Evelyn was lying on her stomach, propped on her elbows. She looked down at the grass.

"I don't know. It just picked up. I kept getting tired. I was bored with not living, too, I guess."

"My life was always screwed up," Helen said. "My father had me christened in the Catholic Church and then my mother had me baptized a Methodist. I was kind of wild, always dancing and chasing around, or being chased, which I liked. It was the running around that got me started. Abbie and I are a different breed of cats from you. You don't really belong here. If that husband of yours had any sense, he could have helped you at home."

"He just couldn't talk much about it," Evelyn said. "And I couldn't. He'd freeze up and then I'd get sorry and then I'd drink more because I didn't know how to make amends. So he'd get cold and sarcastic."

"Well, it will straighten out," Helen said. "Unless you stay trapped by the booze. With me, it's my son. My mother has custody of him. It sounds lousy but I hate her. That's the truth. This mother-love business is something I don't go for. I went away to New York on a binge, and when I came back I was shaky and trying to get over it. She hung on to Douglas, I mean hung on literally. Then she went to court and got temporary custody. Now she calls all the

drying-out places regularly to keep a check on me. The case comes up again in November. Funny thing, I was going to AA when she first went to court. I had been sober a month only. Her lawyer found it out and said that the fact of my going to AA proved I was an alcoholic. AA didn't help me much."

"Will she call here?"

"Oh, sure. But I've warned everyone to say we're not present and we checked in under the name of Hutchison. What a mess we all get in, hey? What really scares me is that some day we'll land in a state asylum."

Helen rolled over and began trembling rapidly. Her face took on a pallor that made her ravaged complexion stand out in isolated splotches. She let herself down on the grass and lay there shaking now and again as one does when sobbing. Evelyn put her hand on her head.

"Don't," she said. She pulled Helen to a sitting position and held her head against her breast. She began to pet her head gently. She did not know what to say.

"This time we've really got to stop," Helen mumbled.

"You can do it, the two of you," said Evelyn.

What excuse have I really got for drinking? she asked herself. I've never been batted around much. What is it? Why should I have been caught? Compared to these people I've had a normal, happy life. Oh, what is missing in me?

"At least you've got David to help you. He knows how you feel. But how can I explain to my husband? With us it's all hidden underneath. Oh, if we could only do something, just come alive some way, instead of this damn, dead suburban existence."

"Hang on to it," Helen said. "You've got to like little things. Our trouble is that we like less and less in life. Oh, well, let's go get some coffee."

### 3

In her bathrobe pocket was her secret treasure of seconal. Abbie kept shoving her hand in the pocket to make sure it was there. Sometimes she toyed with the capsules when no one was around, letting them run through her fingers. Then she would think: In a few days they will all be going home and then the day after, or rather that night, I'll take them. She liked the other alcoholics, except that Martin made her feel uneasy and somehow guilty. He was not like the first day. He seemed a little lost himself and more re-

served. But she had watched many people getting off drunks. They acted various ways. A month from now none of them would be recognizable: their thoughts and looks and likes and dislikes all changed, the resolutions kept or broken, the hospital friendships evaporated and forgotten, the thoughts and emotions buried until the next time they were hospitalized. The story was old to her. Martin's feelings and words would die more quickly than the leaves. Martin. He was different somehow. Just because he had more words, probably. But the thought of him inexplicably brought tears to her eyes.

"What's the matter, Abbie?" Helen asked her. "You're not yourself. You used to joke and laugh around here."

"It's nothing. It's just that I'm not getting over this one as good."

But she could see that Helen was worried about her. It gave her a kind of cosy feeling that Helen should be worried. No one had worried about her for a long time now. She felt part of the small group of patients and yet not part. To hell with them all, she thought, not meaning the other alcoholics but everybody else in the world. She asked the nurse if she could take old Tom for a walk around the grounds.

"When you reach the stone wall back by the trade entrance, sit him there and light this cigar for him," the nurse said.

"Come on, old Tom," Abbie said, putting his checkered cap on his head.

She walked him around the circumference of the grounds, holding him by the arm. Once or twice he stopped to stare at a tree or a bush.

"Old Tom," she said to him. "What is it?"

"There should be a new road," old Tom said. "Are the bulldozers working?"

"I guess so. What has happened to us all, old Tom? Sit down, now, here."

She unwrapped the cigar and Tom took it, wetting the end and holding his head out for the light. As he puffed he stared past the match at her with his eyes blinking in bright happiness. He sighed contentedly. She sat on the wall beside him and suddenly she put her hands over her face, muttering, "Oh, God, oh God, oh God, oh goddam it all to hell."

Her breasts were swollen and painful. Supposing I should come around now? she thought. I won't. It's weeks now. I'm not going to torture myself with hope. It's all decided. She took Tom back to the nurse's office. The rumpus room was empty. She poured a cup

of coffee and went to the piano. She began picking out old tunes with one hand as she sipped the coffee. She forgot her shakiness and escaped her depression for five minutes. When she turned around she found Martin standing there watching her. She caught his face in an unguarded moment of anguished exposure, his jaws clenched tightly and a nerve at the side of his face throbbing. He captured himself quickly and said, "Hi, Abbie," smiling. The tears came to her eyes. She did not know why. He saw them.

"Oh hell, it's all right, Abbie," he said. He came and put his hand on her shoulder.

But she moved out from under his touch. What did the touch mean? What could it possibly mean? She did not want him touching her. It was too late. She moved to the other end of the room.

"I'm going upstairs," she said.

"That's the second time today," he answered.

He sat down and she left hesitantly, not wanting to, wanting rather to return and sit beside him as one might seek the warmth of a fire, but afraid of reawakened longing, afraid of comfort and of hope, afraid of any small factor that might make life desirable.

#### 4

Martin sat there, A loneliness and despair had settled over him. He felt deserted. I haven't much of a stake left in the world, he thought. No wife, now. My boy is nineteen and will pass off into his own. There is an empty house to greet me when I leave. No book can replace a living voice. And then in the late sleeplessness I will drink to remember or to make the words come more alive. Or I'll lie there thinking of a naked woman who loves me. I'll hear the imagined whisper of my name between her sighs.

Ah, look at the self-pity cloaking itself in sickly phrases, he thought angrily. I must do something. It is not enough, this sea of fiction, these waves of words and ideas, this froth of fabled good intent. There is some rotten, poisonous essence to knowledge which allows me to know and to select wrongly.

Ralph Hilton came in and poured a cup of coffee. He seemed calmer, even a bit happy.

"I decided not to call my wife today," he said. "What's the hurry, anyway? A day can't make any difference."

"No," Martin agreed. "And maybe by tomorrow you'll be more settled."

"If I can stay sober for three or four months maybe things will straighten out. I guess I deserve this. I don't know, I feel like some great new thing is going to happen."

"Don't build it too high," Martin cautioned. "We all long for sudden grace, but it doesn't come that way. I've heard it often said that it takes at least six months for an alcoholic to recover fully mentally and physically. Don't expect too much."

"But I'll be out of it now," Ralph said. "A whole week without a drink. That's a good start. What can make me take a drink and go back into that dismal rat race?"

"I don't know, Ralph. But be cautious. You're always going to need a guard up. It isn't going to be just exhilaration. You may find yourself getting all keyed up with enthusiasm until you reach a breaking point. Easy does it. Take it slow. Don't worry it too much. Concentrate on the one day, the one day and the one drink. The very, very simple thing. That's been my failure. I've always had the vision and have forgotten the simple fact."

"I haven't lost anything. I've got a home half paid for and a summer camp and the car paid for, a little bank account, two kids," Ralph said. "There's just a few things to get settled with my wife."

"Your wife," Martin said. "Ralph, if you can't stay sober with your wife's help, you're going to have to stay sober without it. The fact that you haven't been hurt much is going to be more of a hindrance than a help. You'll have to remember constantly that you can lose it all. Don't compare your position to someone else's. Compare it only to your own longing. It's all relative."

"I think it will work out all right," Ralph said. "I'll call home tomorrow."

Tomorrow, Martin thought. Yesterday he wanted to upset the world, today he is hopeful, and tomorrow? But he is like I am, a mental and emotional chameleon.

## 5

In the evening, after dinner, they all sat in the lobby. Now and then one of them rose to go in and talk to Denny. Though he was an alcoholic like themselves, he was somehow apart, having been sober for two months now and suffering from diseases that would remain with him. There was nothing they could do to help him except to talk with him. In the lobby someone would empty the

ash trays, someone else would pick a thread from the carpet, to give the need for small activity some purpose. The ladies upstairs called and Dr. Byrne played "Tenting Tonight on the Old Camp Ground." When he finished, Helen sighed out loud.

"Well, that much of the day is gone," she said. "Now a stretch till our evening sandwich and milk, and then our tolserol and seconal."

"It sure ain't no winged chariot," David said.

"What illegitimate in search of paternity first called time Father?" Martin asked. "Certainly he was neither a prisoner nor a patient."

Helen began to sing to the tune of a Christmas carol.

"Tolserol, oh tolserol, how lovely is thy whiteness. Not seconal nor barbitol, nor anytal, nor nembutal, but tolserol, oh tolserol, the cure for all that alcohol."

"All graduates and undergraduates of Greenleaf Hill will report for volley ball practice at three p.m. Saturday," David said.

"All cheer leaders will be sure to wear bloomers," said Helen. "Cocktails will be served in the rumpus room immediately following the singing of our alma mater, Sober We Stand Together."

"There will be a short address by the president of the senior class, Red-Nose Riley, entitled, 'I Was Drunk on Four Continents and How I Done It.'"

"This will be followed by a new film, *The Hallucinations of Harry*, in Technicolour. No alcoholic will want to miss this honest portrayal of problems vital to our interests."

"Ah," Abbie said, "I'm going to have a cup of coffee."

She stopped by Martin's chair.

"Do you want me to bring you one?"

He was surprised and said, "Yes."

"I'll go and bring Ralph a cup," Evelyn said.

"How do you drink all that coffee?" Helen complained. "First sedatives, then coffee. I knew a guy went to the Peter Bent Brigham alcoholic clinic when it first started and nobody knew much about booze. They gave him benzedrine to pick him up and phenobarbital to lay him down. Did he ever play bouncey-bouncey! He used to meet himself coming back."

When Abbie and Evelyn returned with the coffee, Martin moved from his chair. He paced back and forth a few moments and then sat beside Abbie. She smiled timidly at him. Why a smile now? he thought. Over the lobby a silence fell. A tremor passed from one to the other as the wind might disturb a row of trees. Martin picked

up Abbie's hand and held it through this period of sadness and fear. It was broken by the rapid entrance of a nurse, a substitute, a young woman of twenty-two or three.

"Hello, hello, hello," she said quickly. "Why is everyone so quiet?" She whirled around in the centre of the carpet. "Oh, I'm happy," she said. "Life is beautiful!"

The patients looked at each other in disbelieving astonishment.

"Who told you?" Ralph asked.

"She's got a television set," said David.

"Oh, don't you feel it?" said the nurse.

"Are you in love?" Evelyn asked.

"Love? I should say not. I don't want any part of a man."

"No\* any part?" Abbie asked.

They all began to laugh, except the nurse. She flushed and looked around in a disturbed manner.

"They're all looking for the same thing," she said.

"What would that be? Money?" asked Martin.

"Oh!" the nurse said. "We shouldn't talk this way."

She walked out rapidly, smiling, in a rather urgent fashion, her body somehow before her legs as if she were about to sail off into space.

"God, that one is wound up like a two-dollar alarm clock," David said.

"What's wrong with her?" Evelyn asked. "She acts like she's sixteen."

"Something is off the beam," Abbie said. "That one is a dry drunk if I ever saw one."

They heard the nurse returning. She stood in the middle of the room with the air of a children's teacher, looking about with a forced and cheerful mysteriousness.

"And now," she said. "I'm going to give you all something which can help you a great deal and lead you to happiness."

She began handing each of the alcoholics a pamphlet issued by the Seventh-Day Adventists, quoting the Scriptures and warning the reader.

"I want you all to promise to read it before you go to bed," the nurse said, "and tonight, after you're in bed, I'm going to pray for each of you by name. I've got all your names on the charts. Won't that be nice?"

"Don't forget poor Denny," David said. "He's an alcoholic."

"Or old Dr. Byrne who indifferently prefers the Mohammedans," Martin said.



When she had gone they put the pamphlets aside.

"So that's it," Helen said. "The poor kid."

"What do you mean, poor kid?" David asked. "We take booze and she takes the Bible. Each to his own poison."

"But she's as tight as a piano wire. In another year she'll be flat on her back in a sanitarium if something don't slow her down."

"And where are you?" David asked.

Time settled down on them again, that time which was at once the captor and the liberator. There was a glass-enclosed clock on the mantelpiece over the fireplace. To look at it was painful, yet they all glanced at it now and then hoping that a gap had appeared in the hours. At half-past ten the nurse would bring each of them a sandwich and a glass of milk, then at eleven two tolserol and two seconal. Time was marked off by meals and medicine. It was the seconal they really wanted—to be unconscious, to have a great piece of time skipped while their bodies continued to repair themselves, while the nerves became less taut and all the little spasms in the pools of their beings ceased to ripple.

Despite his resolution Martin took one of the seconals that night. He could not face several hours of tossing and turning in bed. It was this same fear of sleeplessness that had often started him drinking—the thought that he could take a couple of ounces of whisky just to put him to sleep. It worked nicely at times, but then one night the whisky would exhilarate him and he would drink almost a pint and then the next morning he would take one and be off on a bender.

As he lay there waiting for the sedative to release him he thought of Abbie and he prayed to a God that was theoretically himself, and the prayer, that he might help her some way. He wanted the act. He had to believe that there was freedom of choice, at least on the level of human relations. He did not want proof; he wanted participation.

## XI

### 1

ANOTHER day had passed. They were all a little hungrier, somewhat happier at times, a little more stable. Evelyn and Ralph in particu-

lar felt more calm and assured at breakfast. Ralph's high colour had paled to a certain degree and the pouches beneath his eyes had shrunk. His face appeared more lean. The transformation was rather astonishing. Evelyn noted that he was handsome. Without thinking, she began to stay closer to him, to address him by his name, to see if he had coffee at his meals, and to make sure that the sugar and cream were passed to him. After breakfast they took a walk together.

"You know I'm glad I came here," Ralph said. "I needed some kind of radical change. I've never been in a hospital all my life. Outside of the shakes, it's kind of like a retreat. I guess I let myself get smothered with worry and fear about security. I guess I drank because I was afraid."

"We're all afraid of something," Evelyn said.

"I wonder what Martin's afraid of?" Ralph said.

"I think he is afraid of his soul. Whatever his soul is."

"I wish I could afford to worry about that. Anyway, I feel stronger inside than I have for a long time. I'm not going to worry about anything, just staying sober."

"Will your husband come today?" he asked Evelyn.

"I think so. I don't know what to say to him."

"I'm trying to get my phone call lined up. I think I know what I want to say."

"I wish I did. We all need a change in our lives, but how can you effect it?"

"First, I suppose we have to stay sober."

"Oh, the devil with it," Evelyn said. "Lord, what day. Wouldn't it be nice to be tramping through the woods somewhere or be out on a lake? What I'd like is to go home and pack everything and head for Alaska or Mexico with no job or home or ladies' club. I think I could face the possibility of all kinds of diseases if I could escape soliciting funds for their elimination."

They sat on the stone wall, dangling their legs in the warm sun. Evelyn opened her bathrobe, exposing the faded striped-flannel pyjamas.

"I get a kick out of these costumes," she said. "Whoever thought I would be wearing such things? On a man they don't look too bad but they make me feel neutral, like a prisoner."

She rolled up the legs above the knees.

"Might as well get all the sun I can," she said.

Ralph surprised himself by remarking, "What nice legs you've got."

He was unused to flattery or flirting. Fleetinglly he thought, Perhaps if I had run around a little. . . .

"Thank you," Evelyn said with a laugh. "I had to land in a hospital for drunks for someone to tell me that. Do you like selling?"

"It's just a job," he said. "No, it's more than a job. It's something I really hate."

"Why don't you quit, then?"

"And do what? The only thing I ever really liked was working at tree-moving and landscaping. But I was a pick-and-shovel man then, only a kid. I was going to be made a foreman but the depression came and the firm closed up."

"Why don't you do it now?"

"I'd have to start digging again, and how could I support my family? I'm caught where I am. What I'd really like to do is to start some kind of small business with my wife that we would share together. But my wife won't agree to that, I know. She won't take a gamble of any kind but she'll still complain about my being away from home and lacking things. Something like that would be exciting and new for me. I'd work hard as hell. But it won't happen." He hesitated, feeling the hopelessness settling over him once more, the stomach quiver of fear, the undefined melancholy. "When I look at the future I get scared. Where will the end be? I went to one AA meeting. They said to live it a day at a time. I've got to hold on to that. Let's talk about something else. When I started out here with you I was happy for a time. Now I'm back in the dumps."

"It's just the waves Martin talks about," Evelyn said. She put her arm around him in a sudden desire to offer him comfort.

Ralph felt the fullness of her breast against his arm in a flicker of desire. He looked at her. For a moment he thought he might kiss her. She was lovely, and she did understand and like him despite all his failure. But the sedatives had robbed his desire of force and he was unused to women.

"Let's go in for coffee," said Ralph. He would make the phone call after lunch and it would be the start of a new life for him.

"There's Abbie and Martin," Evelyn said. "I feel awfully sorry for her somehow. I wish I knew what I could do to help her."

"Martin kind of watches out for her all the time," Ralph said.

"Funny. Why does he feel such concern? It's not because she's a woman."

"He feels that way about all of us," Ralph said. "I've never met a man like him."

Perhaps she was a little quieter, but then she hadn't shown the shakes as obviously as the others, Martin thought. It was only when you caught her unawares that a still and awful emptiness would be agitated by a sudden tremor that was somehow more than a physical spasm.

"Let's go for our walk, Abbie," he said.

She was sitting across the lobby from him, her feet tucked up under her, picking at her cracked nails, trying to scrape off some of the cherry stain. Now she looked up with that initial fright that was always in her sudden glance. Martin stood and walked to her as she pushed herself out of the chair. He looked into her eyes with a penetrating stare, then he ruffled her hair and smiled.

They walked out into the sun. She tied her robe tighter and shoved her hands in the side pockets. It was a repeated gesture that Martin had noticed, not particularly feminine in character. He wondered what its significance might be. Evelyn had a distinctive habit of clutching her hands before her with fingers entwined, a posture of supplication, the tightness of her grip measuring her tension. But this hiding of her hands seemed to be indicative of nothing, unless she was just ashamed of her nails. They walked down the slope of the lawn.

"There isn't much time left," Abbie said, shivering suddenly.

"Here, on the hill, you mean? A few long days. But we can all keep in touch after. We can sort of watch over each other."

"Why? What does it matter? I can't watch over myself, let alone anyone else."

"But we must see each other."

Abbie leaned one hand against a tree and began quickly to retch. Her eyes watered and sweat bathed her forehead. Martin, in concern, held her other arm. She was furious that he should witness this degradation. She jerked loose and between retches cursed him.

"Goddam you, get away!"

She retched dryly once more.

"Get out!" she said fiercely.

Martin turned his back and ascended the slope, sad because of the pain she had been caused. At the top of the lawn he sat down and tried not to look in her direction, but his eyes wandered unbidden and he saw her sitting, bent over, on the low stone wall.

The retching had stopped and she was wiping her forehead with a handkerchief. She glanced up at him and rose, coming up the hill reluctantly, repentantly, childlike in her misery, still holding the handkerchief in her hand.

"I didn't mean it," she said, when she reached him.

"It's all right, Abbie," he said. "I've had dry heaves, too."

She sank on the grass. Her bathrobe had become loosened. As she leaned on one hand, the pocket nearest Martin sagged open and he saw the store of seconal. He glanced off quickly while Abbie put the handkerchief over them.

He knew instantly that she was planning suicide. The vague remarks assumed solid import, the overreaching despair its proper cause. Should he let events run their course, or allow his impurity to intercede? He turned to look fully at Abbie and her desolation struck a sharp unanalytical blow. The prayer was nothing, it was the act which was needed. He felt a quiet confidence, then the flooding tenderness he had felt when he first saw her and which had become less acute with his own increasing health.

"Ah, Abbie, it's strange the way we long for our own defeat, isn't it? You know there are quite a few alcoholics who have wished for a broken arm or leg, so that their misery could be defined and located and curable. I was one of those. This terrible loneliness we feel is nothing new to me. I have felt it now and again all my life, but particularly when I was a boy. I was in an orphan asylum."

"An orphan asylum," she said. "Yes."

"Yes, what?" he asked.

"The sadness that hangs about you."

"I didn't know it showed. But actually the expression might be sad and the heart quietly happy. I'm not really sad within myself any longer but only in relation to others. To you, for instance. When I was in the orphan asylum, I fell in love for the first time, Abbie. It was a complete small tragedy, played on a silent stage. They used to keep the boys and girls rigidly separated, like groups of hostile animals at the zoo, but one day I noticed a new face in the girls' line as we marched into the dining-room. Her eyes were red from weeping. She had long brown hair. I was shattered by her weeping. I dreamed of rescuing her somehow and making her happy. I think I was about eight years old. Sometimes I wonder if all my relations with women have not been determined by this early experience. I lay awake late at night in the dormitory, dreaming of kissing and comforting her.

"On Saturday I had a job delivering cleaning supplies to various

departments. At the end of the girls' playroom I saw her sitting forlornly on a locker. The caretaker was speaking harshly to her. I asked a girl near me what her name was. It was Ruth. I said the name repeatedly at night as I dreamed. The name almost had substance. My knowing it was a bond. Three times each day, as the lines of boys and girls approached each other at the dining-room, I had a chance to look into her face. She noticed my stare and looked away. But then one day she smiled at me and so we came always to look for each other and across the space was the wave of love and yearning and of sympathy and of promise, and the loneliness was less bitter. It was possible now for me to hug my loneliness warmly about me for I knew it was a shared existence. I knew, or rather I believed, that there would be an end sometime of our separateness, too, and this hope was sustaining. One Saturday I met her in the dim corridor outside the dormitories. We stopped face to face and then I said, 'Your name is Ruth.' 'Yours is Martin,' she answered. We were both happy and then instantly afraid that some one might see us. She went on and I watched her small figure recede in the long dimness of the hall.

"One day she did not appear in line. I thought she was ill and had been sent to the infirmary, but on Saturday when I delivered supplies there, I did not find her. A world collapsed about me and in bed that night I wept in a completely bewildering and devastating bereavement."

Martin, who had been sitting beside Abbie, now stretched out a little before her so that he could look up at her. She was staring off at the distance which the day before she had said she could not bear. She glanced down at him.

"Why did you tell me that story?" she asked.

"I just happened to remember it, Abbie. But perhaps it was more than that. Maybe something caused the memory. Maybe in yourself I see the small girl who went away."

"You're not in love with me like that."

"No, of course not, Abbie. But since seeing you, I've felt a need for you some way, a need to know you."

"A need to serve a sentence with me?"

Her sudden insight startled Martin. He evaded the implication of her question.

"It's better than the solitary confinement you impose on yourself, Abbie. I've been frightened about you. I have sensed your withdrawal, almost a sharp movement towards death. But I can't let that happen. I need you."

"For what?" she asked, rather harshly. "What is it you're driving at?"

"We're both the same," he said softly.

"Are we? I don't think so."

"Both rather wrecked, lost, melancholy, and in need. Perhaps our needs are different in detail, but not basically. Only, I have a desperate longing to rebuild and who can understand it better than you, to whom I feel so close and who has been so hurt? Don't go wandering off, Abbie."

"I don't understand you," she said. "What have I left to give? Nothing. You are a man. A disreputable man is still a hundred times stronger and better than a woman like me."

"Ah, Abbie, a man does not borrow strength from a strong woman," he said. "It is the woman in need who nourishes his confidence and manhood. Well, to hell with it for now," he said with conscious deception, picking up her hand and looking into her stricken eyes. "You look better today," he lied.

Again she laughed without merriment, but more uncertainly in her rasping rejection. Martin sat up and gave her a cigarette, lighting it for her and then lighting one for himself.

"Abbie," he said. "Do you feel all right now? Do you want to sit here while I get you a glass of water or a cup of coffee?"

"No. I don't need anything now. I don't understand you. I've never met anyone who talks like you. It sounds nice but I don't know what it means. I never thought much about things. I only read books when I could see the things written about. I'm ignorant."

"You look uncomfortable, Abbie. Why don't you lie back in the sun while I talk?"

### 3

She was, perhaps, more puzzled than ever by him. The most profound thing her husbands had ever talked of was politics. When they had analysed some candidate's motives, or the effect of a piece of legislation, they had assumed that an ultimate in knowledge had been reached. But she had understood them and their desires. This Martin's desires were so abstract that she could not define them; even the emotion he expressed could not be labelled. He was not seeing her as all men had seen her, particularly before she had lost her looks and her vivacity, as a promise of some greater exercise in

sensation. She had been an expert in spotting overtures. There were none now. Part of her resentment may have been due to this. All this talk of hope and help meant nothing. Yet she was lulled by his talk, despite her crude rejection of simple altruism, her suspicion that there must be something concrete for which he was scheming.

She lay back on the lawn in the warm sun, aware of his presence and his voice but hardly catching the sense of his words. Was it the sedatives? She felt a faint transport and a momentary forgetfulness.

He was playing with her hand now, separating the fingers gently, smoothing the back, but she knew he was not trying to arouse her to anything. He was trying to touch her some way, to touch something within her. What? A momentary anguish at his helplessness seized her. There was nothing to touch. But again there was the sun and the warmth and the wide space beyond his voice marking off the silences, the drowsy silences that had hummed with sunlight long ago.

"Nostalgia played a big part in my drinking," he said. "I was always listening to old songs, remembering the wonder, recalling the energy of my youth, wishing that once again I could tremble with joy at the night breeze or at the sight of apple blossoms scattered on a green lawn. Man is chronically nostalgic, American men more so than others. Is it really immaturity? I think so. In some alcoholics it reaches an acute stage, a sickening, impotent stage that makes the present a prison. That is why I do not wish to return nor do I wish for you to return. Both of us will move on, Abbie, to where we finally recognize ourselves. Having rejected everything, we will accept ourselves."

His longing for her and for himself was more actual than a man's seeking her body, more complete and inseparable from her own disposition.

"Next Sunday we will all have left," he said. "I have a car, Abbie. I want to take you for a ride up to New Hampshire. There's a lake I love, a small lake not crowded with cottages. I'll pack a lunch and pick you up. It is a lake that the sun loves, all ringed about with birches and maples. You'll come, won't you? We can lie there without trouble. A long silent day of peace. Well, we'll have our lunch and look at the water and the day will be as gentle and quiet as a sleeping cat. We'll let the sun lend us strength."

Listening to him, she forgot that there was to be no next week for her. She assumed life and continuity in her forgetfulness. She



forgot her pregnancy and the destructive ignorance of life. But now a question was being asked that required her to speak.

"Can you accept me as a friend, Abbie?" he said.

She remained silent. The word had a long-ago meaning : *friend*.

"As a girl didn't you have a friend? Someone of whom you expected nothing but a feeling of contentment and happiness at his presence?"

Now she said, "Yes," the word almost wrenched from her. What was it, the almost painful violation of her which she could not reject?

"We have lost all our friends," he was saying. "Can you trust me, Abbie? With no probing for motives? Just to be happy for a change, after all the misery? It is possible that happiness is no more complex than this gentle sun and this bright September world. Why should we have selected sorrow?"

She wanted to hear him talk now. She was lost in the soothing sound, in the image and the intimation, in the sense and the peaceful sensuousness, resting now in the voice of a being, a being like herself.

"So now," he was saying, "time turns on the hub of desire. What is it you wish, Abbie?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know what I want."

"Outworn phrases sometimes acquire new meaning. It sounds trite, Abbie, but it is possible to be reborn. I've seen it happen too often to doubt. The sperm of faith into the cell of desire."

"I am going to do something for which I hope you will not hate me," he said, shifting his position slightly.

A shudder went through her and she started to rise up, her eyes opening wide in apprehension. He restrained her gently.

"Just lie there with your eyes shut, Abbie," he said. "It is nothing terrible, nothing to fear. I didn't mean to frighten you."

She felt him reaching into her bathrobe pocket and taking the seconal. She became rigid, almost convulsive, at this uncovering of her secret.

"Just lie there," he was saying. "That's all. Don't speak."

Her mind could form no protest. She had no will. Her body fell away in quivering waves. He took her hand again, holding it tightly.

"I'm sorry, I'm truly sorry, I had to do it," he said. "Did you want to die so badly? I feel guilty about it, to hurt you this way. Don't shake so, Abbie," he pleaded.

The fear raced through her. What did he intend to do? All that talk. Now she really had nothing.

"Trust me, Abbie," he said.

He was silent a few moments while she breathed rapidly and unevenly, her mind trying to form some plan or resolution.

"If you want the capsules back later, I'll give them to you," he said.

"I have nothing, nothing," she said tonelessly. "Nothing in myself, nowhere to go."

"Listen to me, Abbie," he said. "You must have an abortion."

"I can't," she whispered. "I'm not strong enough. I haven't any money."

"Look," he said. "There's the week here at the hospital and then you can go another week or ten days without drinking. You'll eat regularly and rest. When you leave here I want you to go to a doctor and have a check-up. You'll take vitamin injections, anything to build you up rapidly. Don't tell him about your pregnancy. You're just run down and tired as far as he's concerned. I'll pay for it."

"You'll pay for it?" she asked unbelievably.

"Yes. Someday you can pay me back, if you ever get any money. But if you don't, what difference will it really make? I don't know anything about abortions, Abbie, but I'll get someone reliable."

"I'll die anyway," she said.

"You've already died many times, as I have, from booze. This time it will be different. Give up, don't be alone, Abbie. Tell me whatever you want. Physical details mean nothing to me. There is nothing which could make me hate you or not wish to have you as a friend. What could you possibly do, what have you ever done, that I have not, in some degree, done myself?"

She rolled over on her stomach, burying her face in her hands, and she began to weep quietly, almost in comfort. Martin put his hand on her head and petted her gently.

"Ah, that's nice," he said. "Weep a little. Despair needs a little watering, doesn't it? So here we are now, knowing each other a little, something planned."

"Oh God, I look awful. I'm such a wreck," she murmured in an apology, beginning perhaps to feel a woman again.

"Isn't it nice now," Martin asked, "not to have anything to hide, not to be alone, even not to have anything much to give, because if you did we might start bargaining with each other?"

"Please don't ask anything of me," she said. "If you do I will fail."

"But there is nothing to ask," Martin said.

A terrible fright pierced him. What have I done, to what have I committed myself? A dreadful responsibility shrouded him. He turned away to light a cigarette so that she would not see his face. To hell with it, it's too late, I asked for it.

4

Evelyn's husband came after lunch. All the patients were sitting in the lobby when he came past the nurse's office and stood there, looking about at the strange bathrobe-clad figures lounging in the chairs. The conversation stopped abruptly. Evelyn was sitting in an easy chair with one leg cast over an arm, a posture he had never seen. She straightened herself rapidly, with a feeling of having been discovered in some vulgarity, then she stood up. He seemed so unbearably neat and foreign. The other alcoholics, to save her embarrassing introductions, wandered off as she crossed the lobby.

"Hello, Robert," she said timidly, without smiling.

She found herself quivering ever so slightly with tiny fears.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, putting his hands on her shoulders and kissing her cheek.

"All right," she said. "Maybe a little shaky."

"You look well," he said.

"It's the first rest I've had in a long time," she said.

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" he said. "It's not bad here."

He looked around into the rooms with open doors, noting the leather-upholstered furniture and the rugs.

"How are the children? Are they at your mother's?"

"We've been eating over there and sleeping home. The children are all right, though they suspect the truth. I've told everyone who called that you were in a clinic for a check-up. In New York. If I had said in Boston they might have wanted to visit you. I'm getting to be an adroit liar," he said.

She flushed and sat down.

"I'm sorry if I've made a liar out of you," she said. "I know it must bother you. It bothered me, lying for you when you took sick leave to go fishing."

"I didn't come here to argue," he said.

"I'm not arguing."

"You're hardly in a position to."

"Let's drop it," she said wearily.

How did antagonism flare so easily? It must be me. I am the one who drank. How do they keep the healthy hedges growing about them? Do they never feel exposed?

"Were those others all here for the same thing?" he asked.

"They're all alcoholics," she replied.

"This word alcoholic gets me," he said. "It sounds almost like an excuse. Then they say non-alcoholic, as if the whole world was divided into those two classifications. As if there was a sharp division. I just can't see it. You just drank too much and you drank because you wanted to, that's all."

Evelyn had seated herself on one end of the divan, Robert at the other end. She had her hands clenched and the fingers entwined, staring down at the rug.

"Do we have to talk about it now? Can't we wait till I'm home?" she asked.

She felt now that if he kept on talking like this, she would break out into a scream. Already she was shaking. She twisted her fingers and held her jaw so tightly shut that her teeth ached. He really didn't believe she had been ill at all, or was recovering from an illness.

"Those two other women look beat-up," he said.

"They're really quite nice," Evelyn responded. "It's strange. Here everyone is concerned about helping each other."

"What else have you got to do? They're not your kind."

"I don't know," Evelyn said. "I don't know what my kind is. All I know is that they seem to want to help me."

"How can they help you? They don't even move in the same world you do."

"Sometimes I don't move in the same world you do, Robert," she said.

"Well, let's drop that one, too. I called up and had Bobby and Elaine registered for dancing lessons," he said. "Elaine in ballet and Bobby in tap."

"In tap?" she cried.

She had a vision of Bobby jerking with broken mathematics in a grimacing parody of a dance. She laughed bitterly.

"I don't see anything funny about it."

"Oh, don't," she pleaded. "I couldn't stand watching him, jerking like that, inept, like a poorly manipulated puppet. Let him get half-killed playing football, but don't make a tap dancer out of him."

She remembered all the ineptitudes to which she had been sub-

jected as a child, elocution lessons and singing solos in an unaccomplished voice.

"What are you getting so upset about?" he asked, bewildered.

"He'll be a man," she said. "You can't make a man that way. Let him slave over his studies, let him get interested in butterflies or frogs, but not that. It's too degrading, sweating before all those suburban mothers and fathers who come to a recital to boast about their children. He'll dance in some idiotic rayon costume to a tune played twenty years ago."

"What are you getting so excited for?" he asked.

"What was it, the television? The men in the office bragging about their kids? Don't press him into the accepted shape to save yourself chagrin."

"Good Lord," he said. "I didn't think it was that important. We'll talk about it after you come home. I'm sorry I mentioned it."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't meant to get upset."

"The drives are coming up soon. The high school Booster's Club, the Red Feather. You'll have plenty to do when you come home."

"Will I, Robert?" she said.

"Of course. All the things you've been used to."

If only she could go to him and weep in his arms, she thought. Ask for forgiveness, ask to be held in love.

"I have to go now," he said. "I want to talk to the children awhile before supper at mother's."

"You talk to them, Robert. Give them my love. I've been somewhat blind. But we're all blind, aren't we?"

"I don't think so," he said, smiling and putting on his coat.

"Maybe not," she answered. "Maybe it all hinges on a selection of what you want to see."

He stared at her and frowned.

"You know," he said, "you say these things that almost have meaning and then don't. Well, everything will settle down again when you come home. But really, Evelyn, those other two women should be a lesson to you."

"Yes, of course they are, Robert," she said.

She walked with him to the car. But not the lesson he means. In her despondency she thought: The barrier is impenetrable. And after the tears and the forgiveness she would want to be gay and happy with him, to feel the excitement of new thought, to be kissed with passion, to surge into some new sea of extra-keen perception and sensation. How stale everything seemed with him!

She walked back, not wanting to wave good-bye as he drove

away. Suddenly her tenseness broke into trembling. She stopped in the lavatory and swallowed two of the phenobarbitals she had been saving. When she stretched out on her bed, she wiped away the tears that had come to her eyes. Here I am in this place, in these pyjamas and bathrobe, and what does he do? What does he do? she thought hopelessly. Isn't he capable of understanding what love means to a woman? He wants to channel it, narrow it down, when it includes everything, everything.

5

David sat on the side porch with his feet up on the railing. He lit a cigarette but after three or four puffs he felt that familiar little dizziness and that slight nervousness in the stomach. He butted the cigarette and put it in his bathrobe pocket.

"A cigarette is like a thermometer to me," he said. "Three or four puffs and I know how I'm feeling."

"I used to cure a hangover by not smoking all day," Martin said. "By night I'd be feeling fairly well again if I didn't drink that day. I was proud of my will power, too."

Martin could see Evelyn through a window, sitting there with her hands clenched and her head bowed. A wasp crawled along the base of a pane of glass and stopped, transposed in distance beside her face. Evelyn looked up as her husband spoke, in a posture of humble entreaty. It was too painful. Martin looked away.

"Jesus, poor Evelyn," David said. "I've never seen anyone who didn't fall apart after a visit or a phone call."

"What are you and Helen going to do when you leave here?" Martin asked.

"Go back to our jobs. We've always done the same thing. An hour after we leave here, we'll have three or four shots to wash the memory away. Then we'll be all set once more."

"And then?" Martin said.

"Yeah. I know what you mean. In three or four months."

David put his feet down and leaned his elbows on his knees.

"What really scares me is that I'll wind up in an asylum someday. That would kill me. We always make sure we pay this place before any other bills are taken care of."

"What a thing to establish credit for!"

"What can you do with a bartender who went to prep school?" David asked.

Martin laughed. "It is evident that the bartender has to forget the prep school."

"The prep school always makes me think I should be something else. You know Helen knows all about my time on Scollay Square. There is not much we've hidden from each other. One time before we were married I took her to an overnight cabin. The owner was half-loaded. He threw his arms around me and told me he hadn't seen me for several months and had missed my business. Then he turned and said, 'Helen, too! Where have you been?' So you see we know each other."

"But what?" Martin asked.

"What do you mean, but what?"

"Your story came out unbidden and was leading to a but. I'm not a policeman or a priest, Davey."

"Yes, there's something I never told her. I don't know why. Before we were married I guess I didn't tell her because I was afraid she would break it off. Then after, I was afraid of what she might think of me for not telling her before. It happened during the Scollay Square days. It was summer then, hot as hell, and I was standing there one day, broke, shaking, and sweating and just about ready to try to bum a quarter, something I hadn't done before. This fellow who had gone to prep school with me came along. I tried to turn away but he recognized me. He was shocked. I told him I was just down on my luck a little. He was staying at a fraternity house and taking summer courses at B.U. for a degree of some sort, so he told me to stay at the fraternity house till I got on my feet and got a job. He gave me five bucks. The poor guy didn't know anything about alkys. I drank up the five dollars. I lay in bed shaking again. I couldn't take a job even if one was offered me. Then I got scared he would find out what I really was. I needed some money. The house was empty in the mid-morning. I took all the suits I could find and pawned them. I went back and forth, three suits at a time, each time to a different pawn shop. I was really crazy, you know. To show you how crazy, I took a room off Scollay Square. I couldn't get away from the area somehow. I was scared to go anywhere else. A cop hauled me out of a bar-room. I was drunk and bewildered. In court the next morning I pleaded guilty to grand larceny. The judge gave me a year's suspended sentence. I was young and cagey enough to say I did it just to have a good time. I had to report to the probation officer every week. I broke the probation. I left Boston one morning when I was too drunk to report. I was scared they would send me to jail."

"How long ago was that, Davey?" Martin asked.

"About two and a half years ago. You see why I'm so scared. It's Helen's mother. If she ever found out about that broken probation, she'd put the police on me. Just for revenge and to keep Helen's kid. She's a real middle-aged bitch. She didn't bring up Helen right. She fought with her husband all the time and got divorced. Now she's using her grandchild to ease her conscience and regain virtue. She'd see Helen and me in jail or the asylum to accomplish her own salvation."

"How we trample all over each other to achieve goodness," Martin said. "A plain ordinary sinner almost seems admirable. Is that why you went to New Hampshire to work?"

"Yes. Helen didn't know how anxious I was to get that job."

"But you feel lousy because you never told her about the probation? Why don't you tell her now?"

"For a long time whenever a single stranger came into the cocktail lounge I would shake so I could hardly pour a drink."

"Why don't you tell her now?" Martin repeated.

"Now?"

"Right now. Come on, we'll find her. There's a favour I want to ask her, too."

"Aw, I can't tell her now."

Martin stood up and began to leave the porch.

"Wait a minute. I'll go along with you," David said.

They found Helen sitting on the stone wall with old Tom. He was laughing delightedly at something. Helen was looking at him with wonder at his happiness.

"Isn't it something?" she asked as they approached.

Old Tom reached up and patted her head briefly.

"He likes you," David said.

"For Tom, the last answer in that greatly reduced world he inhabits, is a chuckle," Martin said. "Let's walk him some more. Come on, Tom."

They crossed the parking lot and went out on to the lawn in front.

"I've got something to tell you," David said. "Something that happened before we were married."

"I know!" Helen exclaimed. "You've got an illegitimate son. That makes us even."

"Don't make a joke now," David said.

"What is it?"

"I was arrested once."

"So?"



"For stealing," David said.

"Well, that's as good a reason as any. What did you steal, Davey?"

"Fifteen suits."

"Of clothes?" Helen asked incredulously, laughing. "You wanted to be really well dressed, didn't you?"

"I hocked them. For money for booze."

"So?" Helen asked casually.

"Well, they were valuable enough to constitute grand larceny," David said in an effort to establish the seriousness of it. "I was put on a year's probation. I broke it. I can still be sent to jail for it."

He looked down at the grass and kicked at the turf with one toe. Helen remained silent.

"So there it is," he said. "If you want to make a change."

"A change to what, Davey?" she asked. "Forget it. Nobody knows, do they? So we go back to New Hampshire and the thing dies. What are you worried about?"

"Nothing, I guess. I told Martin. I had to tell someone. He told me to tell you."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I was scared, I suppose."

"Well, now you don't have to be scared. To hell with it, Davey. It's not that important."

Martin had walked old Tom off towards the woods. Old Tom had picked up a pine cone and was trying to unscrew the top half of it. Martin smiled.

"It's only man-made things that unscrew, Tom," he said gently.

"You can say that again," David said, approaching. "You wanted to ask Helen something. I'll take Tom inside."

Martin crossed the lawn to where Helen had seated herself on a bench. She was frowning down at the ground.

"Are you worried?" he asked.

"I don't know what it means yet, this thing of Davey's. Can they pick him up for it?"

"I suppose they can legally. But I don't think they are hunting for him. If he's never rearrested or nobody pushes it, I should think it would die in the files."

"It's one more thing to hide," she said. "You see, don't you, how impossible it is to become respectable? How will we ever get a home and establish ourselves even if we do stay sober?"

"All of us here are your friends," Martin said. "You don't have to hide anything from us. It doesn't have to end here, Helen. We can

all see each other after. You're both young yet. If you get custody of your son back, what is to prevent you from establishing yourselves?"

"The case comes up again in November. I'll have to get my lawyer to delay it once more, till spring. I need a streak of sobriety to point to. When it does come up, I've got to make sure it comes before a Catholic judge."

"Why?" Martin asked.

"My mother is divorced and is anti-Catholic. The lawyer could bring it out. I could say I want my son brought up in a Catholic home. Davey was a Catholic. Maybe we'd better start going to Mass again."

"Were you married in the Church?" Martin asked.

"No, in city hall."

"What strange twists. Don't you suppose your mother will mention that? If I were your lawyer I'd forget all about religious matters. Helen, you can't correct things overnight. Stay sober, buy furniture, rent a home, go to church if you can stand it. Even make collections for the community fund. Start a savings account. It is only by these things that the law and the world will judge you a fit mother. Or go the other way. Say to hell with them all and forget about regaining custody of your son. Your son, you will find out, is more relentlessly bound to the social system than he is to you."

"Okay, father," Helen said. "What did you want to see me about?"

Martin grinned at her.

"I'm in desperate need of a good abortionist," he said.

Helen laughed wildly.

"What a change of pace," she said. "I wouldn't have known it, just looking at you."

"It's Abbie."

"Oh, Lord! Hasn't she had enough trouble? I wondered what the matter was with her. How did she happen to tell you?"

Martin shrugged. "Who knows? But there it is. Can you help us?"

"What do you mean, us? You didn't do it."

"No, I just want to help her."

"Why?"

Martin shrugged again. "She hasn't got anyone else."

"Can she pay for it? You've got to have cash. It will cost four hundred dollars, or more, even."

"The money will be available."

"Your money? Do you want me to talk to her?"

"Of course. What have we got to hide from each other? It will do her good to talk to you about it. There's something more, Helen. She stole a whole pocketful of seconal for suicide."

"Christ, she must have been desperate. I know a young doctor in Boston who will do the job. He's all right. He just needs dough. Has she got the seconal now?"

"No, I have."

"Don't get any ideas yourself."

"No, I'm happy," Martin said.

## 6

Ralph was impatient for lunch to appear not only because it marked a half-day, the end of a period of time, but because he was very hungry. This anticipation of food was an important signpost on the road to recovery, he told himself. A certain exhilaration and optimism about the phone call he was to make had returned. He was continually rehearsing the dialogue for it, as he did similarly with sales interviews, forgetting that neither his customers nor his wife had read the script.

But after lunch he decided to go up to see Dr. Byrne first. He had not visited him as yet and was curious. He stood in the doorway a few moments watching the doctor, who was peering through his telescope. Finally he overcame his hesitancy and spoke. He used his hearty salesman's greeting.

"Hi! What do you know?"

The doctor turned quickly and stared with his one eye.

"Know?" he boomed. "Know? I know nothing. What an idiotic question! All I know are assumptions. Man is a bundle of assumptions tied around the middle with the pink ribbon of faith."

Ralph was astounded and chagrined by this response. He did not know how to reply. He smiled in defence.

"Are you an alcoholic?" the doctor asked.

"Yes," Ralph said. "I mean I assume so."

"I read all this crap about religious revival in the papers," the doctor said. "We had a purge of that stuff fifty years ago. Now man is getting all spiritually constipated again."

"I don't know much about it," Ralph said.

"Why not?" the doctor asked indignantly.

"I'm a salesman."

"That's no excuse. What do you sell?"

"Shoe linings."

"Christ, shoe linings," the doctor said disgustedly. "How can you learn anything selling shoe linings? You look like an intelligent young fellow. What is wrong with you that you're selling shoe linings?"

"I have to eat," Ralph said.

But the doctor had suddenly lost interest and was again peering through the telescope.

"Well, I'll see you again," Ralph said. He turned and left. In the hall he stopped a moment to wipe the perspiration that had come to his forehead. He would make the phone call now, but even with the thought a certain tremulous doubt made him turn into the lobby and sit down among the other patients. In the midst of their jokes, he reconstructed the phone call once more: I'm sorry, I've missed the children, something new can come now, I can stay sober, we'll all be closer together, have you been making out all right, I'll be home Friday and we can have a nice week-end, maybe go up to the camp it's so warm and beautiful, I can do a little work on the stone wall. Yes, it would be all right. Anne would understand his sincerity. It was really his own fault, drinking to escape because of economic worries and the competitive strain.

When Evelyn's husband appeared, Ralph went to the phone booth. Poor Evelyn, he thought. He was glad he did not have to face Anne here at the hospital under such abnormal circumstances. He called his number. Savings and insurance scavengers. At the operator's request he deposited forty cents. He knew Anne would be hearing the sound and trying to guess what the deposit was. She would never let him call collect because of something about the tax on the bill. He heard her say hello.

"It's Ralph," he said. He was trembling.

"Oh, it's you," she said flatly.

"I thought I would call and let you know I'm all right."

"You're all right," she said with a faint sarcasm. "Did you call your boss?"

"Yes. I said I was in the hospital for a week's check-up."

"Well, you've got a lot of time to think things over. I hope you realize what you've done. When you come home, things are going to be different."

Her voice had a threatening tone.

"Yes," he said after a long pause.

"Yes? Is that all you've got to say? Don't you want to know how the children are?"

"I haven't had a chance to ask yet."

"Well, they're all right because I'm here to take care of them. There's no need to waste money on any more phone calls, either. Maybe you haven't added up what this is costing, but—"

Softly Ralph hung up the receiver. He could not stand any more of it, neither the voice nor the words. He held his head in his hands for a moment, then he left the booth. He wondered idly if his wife were still talking, if she would ask to be reconnected. He fingered his chin uncertainly. Anger and resentment flooded him, but greater than these was the fear that came surging back, fear of the present and the future, hopelessness, intellectual impotency, social imprisonment.

In the room which was now assigned to him he stretched out on his bed, thinking that the rest of life was going to be a battle, the money battle, the possessions battle, the sex battle. He saw nothing but an antagonistic world, the prison of the envy-ridden, avaricious, encased life of the suburb. Love, which might have softened the strife, was dead. It was a packaged product described on television. There was nothing left except to buy the products of those who offered the sterility of pictured passion. Critically they would scan the screen to discover the faults of each other. My husband is like Chester in *Life's Other Choice*. My wife is domineering like Dorothy in *Life's Quiet Corner*. And they would go to bed withholding their virtue from each other's viciousness, each safe in the fabricated goodness lent them by Lux or Tide or even a rubber tire.

But somewhere, somewhere, he thought as the sedative stirred gently the sediment of his consciousness, there is a sphere where mercy is immediate, where love is not vicarious, where understanding is more than an eighty per cent average in a magazine quiz. I have no hope left except in staying sober, he thought.

## XII

### 1

THE day had been incredibly long. So much appeared to have happened that day. When the nurse brought the seconal at eleven o'clock, none of them took it immediately. Perhaps a kind of weariness

ness had quieted them. They had travelled a geography of sudden depression and soaring exhilaration, where visibility had altered from poor to good and where the quaking swamp of sweaty fear broke into a sloping field of sunlit anticipation and then ended in a bewildering forest. They had met each other torn and half-naked, then rested and restored. They knew each other. They sat now in sprawled fatigue, in a diminished susceptibility to fear or worry. The hospital was very quiet. All of them smoked in silence. They sat somewhat paired off, David and Helen, Ralph and Evelyn, Martin and Abbie.

In the silence Martin heard a soft, hushing sound. He rose and opened the door to the side porch. It was raining. There was no wind. The drops fell straight down, softly in the darkness. It was the first rain in many days. The other patients wandered out to stand with him in a group on the porch. The cool dampness was refreshing.

"It's so quiet and dark," Abbie said.

There was an odour now of the wet grass and leaves and of the pines. There was an air of long-ago mystery and peace for them. Evelyn stepped off the porch and raised her face to feel the cool drops. David extended his palm beyond the roof.

"Lovely rain," Helen said.

"It would be nice now to be sleeping out there in a small tent beneath the trees," said Ralph.

What a terrible loss we have undergone, Martin thought.

He returned to the lobby so that the moment would not be prolonged and destroyed. The others returned one by one. No one spoke for a time.

"Do you want some coffee?" Abbie asked Martin. "Everybody's so quiet. Come on, Evelyn, we'll bring coffee for everyone."

"It will keep us awake," Helen complained.

"Who feels sleepy yet?" David asked. "Let's sit up awhile and then take the red devils."

They all agreed. The reaction set in. Now they had the alcoholic's penchant for doing something final before sleep. At one time it had been one more drink, or a ride somewhere to eat, or sex, or a moonlight swim. Now their choice was limited.

"I'll go with you," Ralph said, rising.

When they had gone downstairs, David said, "What did I tell you? Both Evelyn and Ralph fell apart. It always happens. There are a few clinics around the country that don't allow phone calls or visits except by other alcoholics."

"And they try to call it a disease," Helen said. "Neither Ralph's wife nor Evelyn's husband calls it a disease, you can bet. For what other disease can you lose custody of your child, be divorced, get fired, even committed?"

"Perhaps in time that will change," Martin said. "It's best for us to be a little honest, isn't it? When you're drunk or rum-sick you can't take care of a child properly, you can't work as you should and your employer is quite right in firing you, and if you can't support your family divorce is justified. And some alcoholics do become psychotic. In this, AA is surely right, that the problem is our own, that we should find help within ourselves and among ourselves."

Abbie handed Martin his cup.

"It's black with sugar," she said. "That's the way you have it, isn't it?"

"Yes. Thanks, Abbie," he said, surprised and pleased.

"Well, Friday we all graduate," Helen said. "Then we split up, it's all over, we drift away in all directions."

"Oh, not like that," Evelyn protested. "We can keep in touch with each other, can't we?"

"When anyone suggests forming a group or a club, I feel embarrassed and childish," Helen said. "I squirm, like you do at a lousy vaudeville act."

"I know," Martin said. "I've never belonged to any organization because of the same feeling. But we're not forming a club. We're just friends, that's all. We visit each other once in a while. If someone gets in trouble, the rest can help. We can be honest with each other where we might not be able to be honest with others."

"Aw, all these hospital friendships wear out in a week or two," Abbie said.

"This time it will be different," Martin said.

The nurse, the young substitute, entered the lobby.

"You're all up yet?" she exclaimed. "You see, that's what's wrong with you. You don't go to bed when you should."

"Will you pray for us tonight?" David asked.

"I always pray for all my patients. It fills me with so much joy!"

"What is your name?" Martin asked.

"Miss Pelham."

"I mean your first name."

"Nurses shouldn't give their first names to patients."

"We're not patients. We're alky's," David said. "Guests, so to speak."

"Did you pray for Dr. Byrne?" Ralph said.

"Why not? His chart was there," the nurse said.

"I imagine he would be better off in hell, roaring at the devil instead of bothering God."

The nurse stared at Ralph. Her smile slowly faded and she glared.

"You just don't understand," she said. "None of you do. Didn't God send his only begotten son so that we might be saved from eternal damnation? Doesn't that mean anything to you? It says so right in the Bible. Don't you believe the Bible? Don't you know that it is the revealed word of God? Don't you have faith?"

Her voice rose in a frantic desire to convince them. It was all so apparent to her that she could not understand their blind obstinacy.

"Of course you're all sick," she said, her voice cracking.

"Yes, of course," Martin said gently. "You pray for us again." They were ashamed of having baited her, even so mildly.

"You'd better all go to bed now," the nurse said.

"We will in a little while," said David. "Don't worry about us."

"But you should be in bed now," she insisted.

"Please," Evelyn said. "We just want to talk quietly for a time."

The nurse looked around in defeat and started to leave.

"Good night, Miss Pelham," Martin said.

"Oh! Good night, good night," she said, turning and putting on her radiant smile once more.

The lobby gathered its scattered shadows. Ralph picked up the coffee cups. Abbie went to the drinking fountain to swallow a seconal. The silence descended. Evelyn yawned and lifted her breasts. Martin stared down between his knees.

"I'm going to bed," David said.

Once more the finality fades and we become immersed in the immediate, Martin thought. We are put to bed not with the extravagant courtesan of the unconditional but with seconal, the negation and the compromise, allayed, alleviated, unwillingly at rest within our shrunken world.

He followed Abbie to the drinking fountain. As she raised up and wiped her lips with the back of her hand, she let out a last small laugh and her eyes seemed bright and alive for the first time.

"Happier?" Martin asked.

"Forgetful, maybe."

"Have a good sleep, Abbie," he said.

"I will. See you in the morning."

Martin dropped the red capsule back into his bathrobe pocket. He would not take it. He bent to drink. In the bedroom he had



occupied since moving from the ward, he shut the door and turned off the light, then sat by the open window to feel the dark distance and enclosure of the gentle, wet, noiseless night.

## 2

The sun was out brightly once more in the morning. Tom and Dick came to visit at ten o'clock. They look so different, Martin thought as he watched them cross the lawn, Tom tall, thin, and sharp, looking not unlike Woodrow Wilson, and Dick with his rosy face and bald plate, like a jolly friar.

"Who are these guys?" David asked suspiciously.

"A couple of AA members," Martin said.

"I'll see you later, then."

"What's the matter? What are you skipping off for?" Ralph asked.

"Davey goes on the assumption that something might hurt you but nothing can't," Martin said. "It is the philosophy of avoidance. Davey, you should meet life with wide arms and a brave challenge."

"Oh, play it on a piccolo," David said. "I just can't listen to that talk, the way I feel."

He retreated down the lawn and Martin stood up with Ralph to greet their visitors.

"Well, chuun, how do you feel?" Dick asked Martin.

"All right. I could go home today but I guess I'll stay a little longer."

"It won't do any harm," Dick said. "Take a rest, what the hell."

"How are you?" Tom asked Ralph.

"Good," he said. "A little shaky now and then."

"How did you make out with your boss?"

"Okay. I said I was in for a check-up."

"Say, how about some coffee in the thing they call the rumpus room?" Dick asked. "I read that book of yours, Martin. *The Prophet*. I copied some stuff out of it. Funny, don't you think, all that same stuff coming from different directions? It was a little bit like AA in a way, you know what I mean? No condemning the poor sinner."

"Ycs," Martin said. He found again that in the face of Dick's genuine faith and happiness and humility, he could say very little. He wanted only to listen. He knew Dick's history, the jobs he had lost, the jails he had been in, the bitter, silent struggling with little

education and no vocabulary to give to others whatever it was he had found.

Dick drew Martin aside, crossing the lawn, and spoke quietly to him.

"Don't feel bad about this slip of yours," he said. "What the hell, it's all part of the education, isn't it? If alcoholism is a disease, you had a relapse, that's all. You weren't drinking long, were you?"

"Four or five days. A bender. I was blacked-out a good deal off and on after the second day."

"Oh, hell, you were sober for six months. You ought to bounce back good. How's Ralph there doing?"

"His job and home are bothering him."

"Yeah, it's tough like that. Jesus, a guy that goes for booze and don't like his job has a tough battle. You know I had a lot of trouble with my wife but I hung on some way. Two or three times I started out of the house like a whirling dervish and got as far as a bar-room, and then somehow I ordered a coke."

They reached the rumpus room and Martin poured four cups of coffee.

"You'll hear us say the same thing over and over, Ralph," Tom said. "It may be boring but we can't afford to forget these things."

"Say," Dick said, addressing all of them in a loud voice and adjusting his hearing aid, "did you ever hear a woman delivering and having a hard time of it? God, what cursing and hollering. This one I heard kept screaming, 'Never again, Jesus Christ, never again!' Well, she had three kids after that. On purpose, too. It's this way, I think. Nature erases the memory of pain. If it didn't the race would die out. So then the woman gives birth to another kid. But boy, not for us. What I gave birth to was little men standing in the doorway hooting at me and crawling out from behind the picture frames. Vicious little bastards, too. I got to keep remembering that I can't take that one drink. That's why we repeat so much. Listen, how are they treating you here? Is everything all right?"

"The food's lousy but no one bothers us," Ralph said. "We wander around and talk."

"Talk's the thing," Tom said. "But keep it simple. Twenty-four hours without a drink. A day at a time. Later on we can talk of the steps, Ralph."

"Martin here, doesn't keep it simple," Ralph said.

Tom gave a nod of his head to Martin and stepped outside. Martin followed him part way down the tunnel leading to the kitchen.

"How are you and your wife?" Tom asked.

"It's all over. We're separating."

"You can't patch it up?"

"It would be all patches. No, it's better this way," Martin said.

"Listen, try to keep it simple, will you?"

"You talk of keeping it simple," Martin said. "But where in all this world is this great simplicity? In silence or philosophy or human relations or religion?"

"Oh Christ, I'm not talking about that, Martin. Don't try to snow me under. I'm only talking about your booze problem. Go off on all the tangents you want. But it's one day without one drink, that's all. You can't take one drink in safety. You ought to be convinced of that now. If the steps bother you, forget them. Don't be so critical of the programme."

"I'm not critical of the programme, Tom. I'm critical of myself."

"All alcoholics sell themselves short. It's the rebound from egotism. Forget it. Be happy. Don't be one of those tragic bastards who can help everyone but himself. You've done a lot of good in AA. Fellows have told me how much your talks have helped them. Andy, there, would like to have you speaking at the prisons all the time. But be a little selfish. Help yourself first."

"All right, Tom."

"Let me tell you something. I've been thinking a lot about you," Tom said. "I've listened to you talk. I know you consider alcoholism a mental and spiritual disease, but I don't think you really believe it's a physical disease. It may be more romantic to think of it in mental and spiritual terms, but you've got an actual, low-down physical illness. Think about it. Didn't you ever raise up a drink and swallow it and then say to yourself, 'If I take another I'll drink the whole bottle and be sick tomorrow'? You knew it. Your mind knew it quite clearly. You knew your wife would be angry. You knew you would miss a day's work or have to fake through the day. But what did you do?"

"I took another one," Martin said.

"Your mind told you no, but what did your body say? The compulsion was set up, a physical compulsion which you could not control despite all that your mind told you. It's a physical disease, Martin—something has happened to your body."

"Okay, I agree with you. I even admit I have a tendency to romanticize about it."

"That's it," said Tom. "So let's go back. Sometimes I think it is a matter of simple happiness. You hear it all the time. If you can't

be happy sober, you're sure as hell bound to get drunk. Do something to be happy about, Martin, no matter what it is. Then there's that twelfth step, which makes you forget yourself. Get a pigeon, help someone who is a drunk. If you're trying to keep someone sober, you won't take a drink yourself."

Tom took Ralph outdoors again. How wise, how perceptive they get, Martin thought. He knows Dick wants to talk to me alone.

"I'm going to have another coffee," Dick said.

"Do you go to Mass every Sunday and to confession?" Martin asked him.

"Why, sure," Dick answered. "I started again a year after I had gotten sober. I guess maybe I'm not a good Catholic in some ways."

"What ways?"

"Well, maybe I got a little too much of the AA slogan, Live and Let Live. Too much tolerance. I can't be militant. What the hell, I've committed too many wrongs to ever be able to judge anyone or anything. I'd feel like an awful faker. All I can try to do is to help someone who was hurt like I was."

"Let's go outside," Martin said.

For him the rumpus room had suddenly reverted to the damp, melancholy, dim cellar it had once been. The outside sun cured him immediately. They sat together with Ralph and Tom, forming a small group talking quietly in the sun.

"Do you think you may go to a few meetings when you go home?" Tom asked Ralph.

"Yes. I've got to stay sober some way," he answered.

"Try it out," Tom said. "I'll get you one of the little pamphlets listing the meetings. There must be fifty groups right around Boston. You can get to a meeting any night, or on Sunday in the morning or afternoon even."

"Look, don't feel embarrassed about coming back," Dick said to Martin. "Nobody blames you, everybody understands. They'll just all be happy to see you again. It could happen to any of us. We all learn from each other's mistakes."

A car stopped by the porch and an old priest got out. Martin had seen him several times. He was early today. Generally he did not come until after lunch. He came to visit Mollie, the one who knitted the non-existent afghan. He was grey, somewhat stooped, with a grizzled, kindly face, with wrinkles and creases deep enough to hold shadows, a face wreathed with the scars of knowledge.

"I'll be up for you Friday then," Tom was saying to Ralph.

"I think I'll stay till Saturday," Martin said. "I haven't got any-

thing to go home for. Don't come for me, Tom. I'll get home by bus."

What had suddenly impelled him to decide this? he wondered. He wanted a day alone to wander around thinking, perhaps? Perhaps it was something else. He was unaccountably disturbed again. By guilt?

"Well, it all comes out in the wash," Dick said.

"Washed in the blood of the lamb," Ralph said. "Christ, how that hymn used to scare me as a kid."

He drew apart with Tom as they crossed the lawn.

"Do you go to church?"

"No," Tom said. "They all seem to want to compete with each other. I pray a little, that's all, but I don't know what God looks like or what God actually is. I don't want a church to draw a picture for me, either, because it would be their picture. And I don't like religion mixed up with politics the way it gets with churches. But don't worry about those things now. Get your body healthy and your mind sobered up first."

### 3

Shortly before noon Mary J. came into the lobby. She looked fresh and gay.

"Hello, Evelyn," she called across the lobby. "My, what a recovery! You look wonderful. I'm Mary J.," she told Abbie and Helen. "How is it going?"

"All right," they said,

"This brings back old memories," Mary said. "I was in five times some years back."

"*You* were?" Abbie asked incredulously.

"Oh, sure. I ran the whole route, all the way up to the fake suicide." She shook her head in remembered dismay. "Another six months and it wouldn't have been a fake."

"How did you get off it?" Abbie asked.

"AA help," Mary said. "Admitting I was beat and accepting help. It's almost too nice a day to talk about booze. Can't we sit outdoors?"

But they did talk about booze, sitting on the benches at the top of the lawn. They compared sensations and emotions, little tricks they had used in cadging another drink or hiding a bottle, relations with their husbands. They became cosy and friendly about their aberrations.

tions, almost like a women's-club group discussing domestic problems.

"Did your husband come?" Mary asked Evelyn.

"Yes. We didn't hit it off too well."

"That's natural, Evelyn. It takes a little time. Our husbands are as bewildered by our drinking as we are. Just keep the booze problem on top for a while if you can. Get that arrested and everything will straighten out. A day at a time. Sit down and lean against the wall, don't try to jump over it. Are the children all right?"

The men were in the rumpus room, waiting for lunch. Evelyn introduced them to Mary.

"I've seen you at some meetings," she said to Martin. "I've heard you speak."

"I've heard you speak, too," he answered. "I feel like an apostate, having spoken and being here."

"Oh," she said, shrugging and smiling. "It happens. What can you do? Forget it and start over again. The only one who will condemn you is yourself."

The lunch turned out to be some bologna and liverwurst with lettuce and tomatoes, an anonymous pudding, coffee. Mary decided not to stay for lunch.

Evelyn remained with Ralph in the rumpus room. When she stood up she brushed against him.

"Let's walk," she said. "That's all we do. Walk and talk."

Going up the stairs Ralph put his hand about her waist. The action was like a memory. Towards Evelyn he still felt uncertain and yet an ease of bearing and a forgotten confidence was growing stronger. Perhaps it was the small ways in which she appeared concerned for him. His wife had given him no personal service. He took his own shirts to the laundry. He cooked his own breakfast and had his lunch out. He cooked Saturday-night supper and Sunday dinner for the family, also. He did his own shopping. His wife never went shopping without him and often he did the food buying at the supermarket alone. To have a woman concerned for him even in such a small matter as getting him a cup of coffee seemed strange. He was pleased and could not help feeling flattered. He gave a short laugh in which there was no amusement.

"What was that for?" Evelyn asked.

"I just happened to think of the way Martin talks and then that maybe the whole trouble is as simple as sewing a button on a coat." He paused and looked down at Evelyn. "Or someone getting you a cup of coffee."

**"Doesn't your wife sew on your buttons?"**

**"Not unless I ask and then she is annoyed. I do a lot of work around the house, cooking, washing dishes, scrubbing the floors and waxing them, and it seems the more I do the less my wife thinks I do. I put up the storm windows and she complains that the lawn isn't raked. I rake the lawn and get criticized that the storm windows were let go for another weekend. On Thursday I have a long trip through New Hampshire, two hundred miles and ten or twelve sales calls that are particularly trying. When I get home I'm weary and I sit eating supper without talking much. Besides, she and my two girls are talking about dresses or the neighbours. 'What's the matter with you?' she asks. 'Tired,' I say. Her response is almost always the same. 'What have you got to be tired about?—you've only been sitting in the car all day.' Funny thing. We drive down to New York twice a year to visit an old friend. It's two hundred miles. My wife doesn't drive. When we get there I suggest going out. Do you know what she says? 'I'm too tired.' Are all women so illogical, Evelyn? This simple lack of logic drives me frantic at times."**

**"Does your wife work?"**

**"No."**

**"No! I wish my husband helped me out with some of the work and obligations."**

**"What is it, how does it grow, this terrible block in marriage, this withdrawal and then the deadness? What makes it a contest? It becomes a fight for domination and the more one gives in the more bitter it grows."**

**"I guess it's because both lack confidence and are always on the defensive. Or maybe love dies. Maybe love dies—the love between a man as a man and a woman as a woman. And maybe those who have successful marriages are those in whom the separate manliness and womanliness have grown into a third gender, would it be? Ah, who knows? You're a nice-looking man, Ralph."**

**"And you're more than nice-looking," Ralph said.**

**"How did you feel after you called home yesterday?" Evelyn asked.**

**"I fell apart. God, I was a balloon someone put a cigarette to. I hung up in the middle of it. And you know, when I dialled the number I was so sure I had everything all set. I was so certain there would be a get-together. I had the vision. You know, like when you're half-drunk."**

**But then, there was always the onus, he thought. She wanted to go to bed with him, she threw out all the hints, but then finally the**

initiative had to come from him. He had to go through all the play-acting of seducing her, so that if anything went wrong he was to blame and it was not her at all who had wanted it, oh no, she had only acceded to his desires. Christ, what deception! Were women really that dishonest? One was.

"Let's sit down," Evelyn said.

In a moment of despair, a sort of instantly appearing and disappearing epilepsy that made his mind and body jerk, he saw his own ignorance and the words came unbidden to his mind: Please let me know.

"Sometimes," Evelyn said, "I think all drinking is in the mind. It's there that one decides, isn't it? Because of all the things, the boredom, the desire, the dream and the fear, the anger, the resentment, the guilt and remorse."

"But not the shakes. It's the body that is feverish, that sweats and shakes."

"But it's the mind that decides on the drink, isn't it? Let's say you've tapered off. You haven't had a drink for a week. Then isn't it the mind that lets the consequences?"

"But after a couple it's the body demanding more. Maybe it's the weight of the blood divided by the weight of the alcohol, or the volume, or something."

Evelyn shuddered and almost remembered.

"Let's stop!" she cried.

"Stop what?"

"The talk, the continual talk, of alcohol."

She had a sudden fear that the gaps would be filled and that the memory would be too shattering.

"Sit down," she said. "Let's forget what's significant. Look, here's a cricket in the grass. Supposing you were a cricket. What a tall forest the grass would be."

Ralph stretched out and leaned on an elbow. They did not speak for a long time. Without thinking he was holding her hand, playing with the fingers. He became calm and began to feel the warmth of the sun. He lay back and closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry I've been so bloody gloomy," he said.

"Oh, it isn't only you," Evelyn said with a small forgiving laugh. "I think sometimes we believe it is wrong to be happy. We are afraid of being good, we are afraid of being bad. Can't we just drift for a few days?"

"Sure," he said. "Just drift. I could almost fall asleep. What nice hands you have, Evelyn."



She fingered the lobe of his ear and then ran her hand over his forehead. Such a thing was a long time ago, he thought. Her hands were so soft and comforting. He reached up and put the palm of her hand to his lips. Innocent, unattached pleasure filled him.

"Put your head in my lap," Evelyn said.

What was this repose she was giving him? Only the touch of her hands? Was it a deep longing he had had to be touched by womanliness, by some lost touch of gentleness and deference and a willingness to hear the small intimacies of which he now spoke? How he had longed for moments like these, moments of shared rest, of unspoken and inactive union. It was profoundly sensuous. No erotic urge or image disturbed his placidity.

"How kind you are, Evelyn," he said.

"Oh, it's nothing. The grey on your temples is classic. How old are you, Ralph?"

"Forty-four."

"I'm ten years younger. Strange. I feel older than you. Maybe I'm feeling motherly."

"Don't say it," he said. "Just womanly."

They stayed there for an hour, occasionally talking.

"One of my legs has fallen asleep," Evelyn said.

She could not stand on it for a few moments when Ralph helped her to her feet. He held her around the waist until the circulation was restored. They passed behind a pine tree. Evelyn stopped and faced him. There was no mistaking her searching look, the quick lowering of her eyes, her small thrust forward without her feet moving, the raising of her breast. His kiss was filled with a desolate longing to be enclosed, to have so much erased in the soft sensation, to move sharply into some other sphere, away from the agonized reality. It was as if he had been pursued and had reached a shelter. Evelyn drew away slowly and they walked back without speaking.

## XIII

### 1

CERTAINLY one cannot be unhappy forever. Their recovery was accelerated. The regular eating and sleeping, the supplementary vitamins, had restored their physical rhythms. They had stopped

taking the sedatives, or were taking them very sparingly, carrying the pills and capsules wrapped in paper napkins in their bathrobe pockets.

They found themselves laughing more frequently, more naturally. Hope became more durable, less at the mercy of decomposition by a chance thought or memory. Their affection for each other grew and in the smile or laugh they saw the impalpable implication of restored and felicitous life.

In the evening there was an AA meeting in the rumpus room. Helen and David remained in the lobby. Abbie, Martin, Ralph, and Evelyn sat together at the end nearest the door, an entity in their bathrobes, apart from the seven or eight local members who were all dressed in their best clothes. The chairman was a squat, substantial-looking businessman who continually smoked a cigar. He announced that the meeting was to be a discussion and then outlined the purpose and methods of AA in a complete and simple manner. The talk became concerned with that part of the twelfth step which mentions a spiritual awakening. Martin tried earnestly not to be irritated by the facile claims of several members to such an awakening but his annoyance continued, perhaps aggravated by his position as a patient. It was with a sickening recoil that he heard a member state, "I am a Catholic so the spiritual part of this programme came easy to me." He had heard this statement before several times at other meetings and always with a fear that formal religion might one day destroy the fellowship. In his mind he contrasted the speaker with Dick, who was also a Catholic, and he felt reassured. The chairman asked if the patients had any questions. Martin had decided to remain silent but something impelled to speak. The last thing mentioned had been faith.

"I'd like to say something," he said. "It is quite easy to speak of faith in an offhand fashion and to assume one has it, but despite all the uninformed talk about faith with which the country has been flooded since the war, and which may very well be purely defensive in origin, man remains a rational animal with the right, indeed the duty, to question."

He looked down at the floor and scuffed his foot.

"Several years ago I cut a brief news item from a Boston paper," Martin continued. "It told of a baby who had fallen from its crib and had been strangled to death by a chain around its neck which had caught on a button of the mattress. It was a chain to which was fastened a religious medal. Perhaps someone here has an answer for the question that inevitably arises from this occurrence."

There was a strained silence during which Martin was aware that some of the members were classifying him as a screwball.

"It was just an accident," one member finally said.

"Then God's power is limited and faith is of little value if it is at the mercy of chance," Martin said.

The chairman said, "You can't explain those things. God works in his mysterious ways."

"Yes, I know," Martin said. "But that has never been an answer for me, merely an evasion."

"Keep it simple," someone called.

"Well, the answer for me turned out to be very simple," Martin said. "My son has an Indian friend at college named Singh. I showed the item to him and he was very puzzled, not at the implication of the occurrence but at why I should show him the clipping at all. I tried to explain. 'But what are you disturbed about?' Singh asked. 'The baby is God.' For me this appeared to be a reasonable and acceptable solution. Later he said something else that made me rather ashamed. He said, 'I am a good Hindu; therefore I can be a good Christian. But you are a good Christian; therefore you cannot be a good Hindu'."

The chairman looked down at some pamphlets, moved them about briefly, and then spoke.

"This is not a religious programme, though there is a spiritual part to it," he said. "No one here tries to define God. Perhaps we should pass on to some other more practical helps to recovery."

"No, wait a minute," a man protested.

Martin looked at him. He was tall, massive, with heavy, crude features, a farmer or construction worker perhaps. Beneath his thick greying brows and large dark eyes there were pouches of wrinkled skin that would always be there. He had long hairy ears.

"This fellow has something that might be valuable to some of us. A new man comes in here and has some trouble about believing in, as we call it, a power greater than himself. I had that trouble. I don't go to any church. I wasn't brought up in a faith. Catholics and Protestants who get dry mostly go back to their religions but even some of them can't go back and accept what they once did. I tell you this thing bothered hell out of me for a long time. I wanted to stay sober but I couldn't give up. I couldn't see what that power was to which I could turn over my life and my will. Well, one way or another, I arrived at the same point this fellow has. I came to realize I was part of something. After a while I could call that something God without feeling like a faker. What this fellow said

means a lot to me. His conception of God allows me to accept a lot of things that might otherwise bother me all the time."

The chairman was smiling broadly now.

"Well, Joe, you've been sober for five years so there must be something in it," he said. "That's why I like discussion meetings. Something always comes up."

Martin turned to look at Abbie. She was smiling at him with a look almost of veneration. Her expression disturbed him. He took her hand and sat looking down at the pathetic symbol of her ruin, the cracked, stained nails. His agitation, he knew, was caused by her growing trust and his own part in her awakening faith.

Retaining Abbie's hand, he rose and left the room. They tiptoed up the stairs and went out onto the lawn. The moon was bright. He stood facing her.

"No matter what I may say and no matter how floundering they may be in their thoughts and words, they have remained sober and I have gotten drunk," Martin said. "That is the final answer. There is something that they have and which I need and have never been able to borrow. So I am coming to you for help, Abbie, in a kind of blind dependence. I hope we may be able to help each other."

"But I don't know anything," she protested.

"I think you will be surprised at what you do know," he said. "Let's stay outside awhile."

He led her across the lawn. On a bench they made out the figures of Helen and David. They were embracing and had just finished a kiss.

"Hi," Helen said. "We were smooching. The meeting isn't over, is it?"

She spoke in a whisper.

"No," Martin answered. "We'll go back for coffee."

They all lit cigarettes in the darkness.

"What a nice night," Abbie said. "Like midsummer."

"You know, I've got a half bottle of booze behind the back seat of my car," David said. "Found it this afternoon. I can't remember putting it there. Do you want a shot, Martin?"

"No. Have one yourself."

"What for? I'm paying eighty-five bucks to get sobered up."

They laughed quietly.

They sat on benches on the lawn in the moonlight, talking quietly and happily in undisturbed friendship. The waves reside, Martin thought. The tips of their cigarettes glowed in the darkness.

When they rose to go in, Evelyn, with a woman's subterfuge,

blocked Ralph's way and bent to adjust her shoe, holding his forearm with one hand. The night had infected her with longing. Perhaps if she had had her children to kiss and tuck in bed, or places to set for breakfast, the wish would have been unheeded, but there was no small act to prevent the growth of vague dissatisfaction into recognizable desire. The others went ahead, chatting softly. She stopped once more so that the distance would be increased. She did not want to come within the range of light cast by the porch. She remembered that long ago this intrigue of small movement had taken place at dances and football games, even in classrooms where she had wanted to sit beside a certain boy. I am no longer a girl. She stood erect and breathed deeply, standing at Ralph's side.

"One last breath of free night air," she said. "I'm seldom up this late at home."

She took his arm, lifting his forearm so that hers was along it, her hand in his, but she did not start to walk. She raised his arm an inch or so, shivering slightly to cover the movement. Her breast touched his arm.

"Are you getting cold?" he asked.

Her mind sought neither justification nor arrangement. The darkness called for no appearance.

"No, it's just the night and the lateness," she said, keeping her voice lower than his, in a tone of soft secrecy.

From the buildings of the hospital, from the town below the hill, there were no sounds. Scottie would come soon looking for them. The inevitable interruption. She turned to face him. His head and shoulders blocked out the bridge.

"You were awful lonely this afternoon," she said. "So was I. I wanted someone to hold."

"Yes, Evelyn," he said.

He put his hand on her back and leaned to kiss her gently. She let her lips remain and then moved against him. One of her hands pulled at the sash so that there would not be the barrier of the woollen bathrobe. She let his thigh come between hers and at the contact some flowing, melting sensation within her caused her to sigh contentedly and yet strive for further contact.

She heard the door of the porch open. She turned her head quickly but remained pressed against him. Scottie was peering, holding the door open. They could not be seen.

"We'll be right in, Scottie," she called.

"Can she see us?" Ralph asked.

"She's going in."

There were only a few more minutes. She put her mouth against his again, put her hands inside his bathrobe to force it open and feel his chest and ribs. His hand had lifted the back of her pyjama shirt. She felt his naked hand on her back. There wasn't time enough. She wanted one further contact, more intimate. She guided his hand from her back to her breast which he touched softly and tentatively at first, then cupped in his hand. She found his hand warm and comforting, a reward. She kissed him with abandon, opening her mouth, feeling his ardour mount as he pressed his loins against her. Then she drew back.

"We'd better go in," she said. "Scottie will think we're going to spend the night here."

"Can you come to my room tonight?" he asked.

"It would be too risky," she said.

"Tomorrow night, then? Here?"

"Yes, tomorrow night," she said. "Earlier."

She tucked in her pyjama top and tied her robe about her. She walked towards the porch.

"Don't think about it, Ralph," she said.

He opened the door for her.

"Ah, there you are," Scottie said. "I thought maybe you had taken a stroll downtown."

## 2

Abbie was not asleep, though she had taken one of the capsules. She saw Evelyn getting into bed and smiled to herself, knowing that some passage of love had taken place. It did not concern her, though she hoped neither Evelyn nor Ralph had been upset. She had no defined morality to lend her either indignation or piquant shock. Evelyn needs to give herself to someone, was her only conscious thought about it.

She wished earnestly that the seconal would put her to sleep. Martin had all those he had taken from her. She had one saved. She reached for her bathrobe. She felt carefully for the glass of water on the night table and took the capsule. The thought, the comfort of which she did not want because it brought a parallel discomfort, came into her mind: Martin will take care of me. Peace and anger at the same time. She had always retained some kind of indignant integrity. She had always given something in return, a laugh or her body, some kind of reciprocation. She had nothing for him. It was

because of this that she felt the anger. It sprang from a complete humiliation.

Suddenly her body became rigid. Her pulse beat more rapidly. Was Evelyn asleep? Would it be possible? Scottie was probably sitting in the nurse's office. To hell with it. The seconal would put her to sleep. But the urge would not be quieted now that the possibility had arisen. She could feel her blood warming, the lovely haze, her mind meeting each chance thought with a satisfying riposte, the reawakening of confidence, the establishing of herself as a woman once more. They were all asleep. She named them as though she were touching each of them, sealing their sleep, Martin, David, Ralph, Helen, Evelyn. Only she was awake. A thrill of adventure and freedom took hold of her. It would be an act she chose, that was not thrust on her as everything had been for the past weeks.

She got out of bed and slipped on her bathrobe and shoes. Evelyn remained motionless. She walked quietly out of the ward and across the lobby. The light was on in the nurse's office. She saw Scottie reading a book behind the plate glass window. She pushed open the office door.

"Hi, Scottie," she said.

"Mrs. Reece! What are you doing up?" Scottie put the book face down on the desk.

"Oh, I just can't sleep. Maybe it's too warm. What are you reading?"

"A murder mystery." Scottie restrained a laugh. "I like to shiver."

"Don't let me interrupt you. I'm going out on the lawn for a breath of fresh air."

"Did you take your capsules?" Scottie asked.

"Yes."

"Do you want another?"

"No. They'll take hold after a while. I just want some cool air."

Scottie picked up her book, frowning reflectively.

"Oh, all right," she said. "Don't stay long, though."

As soon as she was beyond the light of the porch, Abbie turned abruptly and walked swiftly to the parking lot. The moon had lowered but she knew where David's car was, parked off to one side by itself. She hoped the door wouldn't squeak or one of those overhead lights come on. She had to walk on her toes to stop the clacking of her high heels. She hoped David hadn't been joking, that there was a bottle there; that he had not been bragging; that it was whisky, not wine. The door opened quietly, no light came on. She pushed her fingers down behind the back seat. It was a fifth.

A hiding place even the police overlooked at times. They always looked under the front seat and in the glove compartment. She had to strain to pull the bottle loose. She unscrewed the cap. It was a whisky bottle. She smelled of it, smelled the strong, reassuring odour of booze, and tipped the bottle up.

The elongated fingers of euphoria extended, octopus-like, through her body. They stretched from her lower abdomen to her thighs and calves, from her stomach to her chest, to her breasts and shoulders, and down her arms. She stretched softly, with a happy smile.

Perhaps she did not look as bad as she had believed. In a month she would be looking better. Maybe if she went to a beauty parlour, had her hair set, had it dyed brown, something done to her complexion. Her shape was good, she had good breasts, they hadn't sagged, and her legs were good: slender calves and full thighs that were solid. She imagined a new dress that would show the flatness of her stomach, the curve of her hips, suggest her buttocks, that would offer up her breasts.

All this was leading up to something which her mind was holding back deliciously, like a child saving candy. She was having a little intrigue with herself, chiding herself gently with an inward smile at her impatience. She knew the appearance a man wanted. She would be able to see immediately the first faint, faint ray of desire. She would feel it in the touch of his hand on her elbow, see it in the hardly noticeable hurry with which he reached for a door or lighted her cigarette, in the loss of a word in hesitant speech. And now she allowed herself the luxury of the name. It was Martin. It was Martin, wanting her as she had been, it was herself giving herself, with something lovely, alive, passionate, to slake his sorrow, to make him laugh and desire, to hand her proudly towards a group, all recognized, as I am now, vibrant and alive, his, so that everyone would know, his. I am his. Nothing, no one, can touch me but him. I am Martin's. I have always said: He is mine. Now I will say: I am his, a gift I have spent my life obtaining to lay before him.

And now, before she fell asleep, she went back to refurbishing her face, her vitality, and her wardrobe. No doubt disturbed her reverie. It was not until morning, when she awoke from a leaden sleep that Abbie felt, perhaps for the first time as a woman, a searing regret and a need for repentance. But hope, even that born in a fantasy, is not without value.



They all drank their first cup of coffee and waited for breakfast.

"Well, this is our last full day," Helen said. "Who's for croquet on the lawn? Abbie, what do you say? Or would you prefer pitching a few horseshoes?"

"I think I'll help Mollie with her afghan," Abbie said.

As they stepped outside, Martin drew David and Helen aside.

"Come," he said. "I've a little favour to ask of you. I'm worried about Ralph."

"What do you mean, because of Evelyn?" Helen asked.

"No, not that. That's natural. Look, there's six of us here. We'll all be going. Now if a casual observer of us, or even an experienced observer for that matter, were asked about the probable order of our getting drunk again, he would guess this way. First Abbie, then you two, then myself, then Evelyn and Ralph equally. I think that order is wrong. I would guess this way. First Abbie, who will drink in despair, then Ralph, who will have a deep and sincere desire not to drink but who will get too intense and nervous, then Evelyn, who will drink in forgetfulness and innocence, then myself, then you two. You two will have the love and understanding, the complete knowledge of each other that we others will lack. I don't say that any of us will drink but that is the way I would line up the order. Most of all I'm worried about Ralph. Perhaps you can help a little. He has a long sales trip through New Hampshire every Thursday. He gets tired and discouraged often and has always drunk on that day. Why don't you see if he can arrange his trip to have lunch with you on that day? A little talk and a few jokes might make the difference."

"Sure," David said.

"I'll try to take care of Abbie till she's better and I'll see Ralph and Evelyn, if her husband permits it. Sunday afternoon some time I'll drop in with Abbie. On another weekend you can come down and stay at my place, or even any night if you're knotted up and want to drive, no matter how late it is. Do you think we can all make it, Davey, with a little leaning on each other?"

"Aw, who knows?" David said, looking down with embarrassment. "We can sure as hell try. If we don't, all that can happen is we die or get locked up."

He walked away. The talk disturbed him, seemed to be pushing him. He did not like to be pushed, not even by himself.

"You're a tricky one at times," Helen said to Martin.

"Me?"

"You start talking and then you assume the one you're talking to has thoughts and intentions which he may not have had at all but which he begins to believe he does have."

"Ah, you're too abstruse for me, Helen."

During the day Helen became distraught. She had a strange tight look at times, as though her jaws might be watering from imminent nausea. Her smile became forced. She did not look directly at people. David hovered near her and appeared worried. Neither of them ate much for lunch and afterward stayed indoors. Some fear lurked in the eyes of both, a new fear that the other alcoholics could not understand.

Evelyn and Ralph were hardly aware of it. They wandered around together, laughing at some secret joke, touching hands, their eyes seeking each other in an intimate union. The mantle of apprehension had fallen from Ralph. He wore a happy confidence, had a gallant air, joked with Mrs. Parker for the first time. Evelyn was radiant, full of energy. She poured coffee for everyone at lunch and afterward stacked the dishes on the wagon.

"I wish we were all going to be here for another week," she said. "I'm enjoying this. Is there something wrong with me?"

"It's never wrong to be happy," Martin said. "You have the look of a woman who has been given a diamond ring. What has happened to you?"

"I just feel good," Evelyn said. "Maybe it's the weather. Ralph has been making me laugh, too. Somehow I'm not worried."

"And you, Ralph?"

"Oh well, here we are. There's nothing we can do about it, is there? Soon enough I'll be back peddling paper shoe linings."

At two o'clock Martin stationed himself on the porch and shortly after a car came along and the old priest who visited Mollie got out. Martin found himself trembling. It was all he could do not to turn away. The priest nodded to him.

"Good afternoon, Father," Martin said. "May I speak to you a moment?"

The priest stopped and smiled. His shoulders were rounded with age and he had to lift his head at an uncomfortable angle to face Martin fully.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I wondered if you would be coming here Saturday after lunch," Martin said.

The priest looked directly into Martin's eyes and let a moment elapse before replying.

"Yes, I expect to," he said.

"Would it be possible for me to talk with you a few minutes, then?" Martin asked.

"What will you wish to talk about?"

"Just something that has been troubling me."

Once more the priest let an interval of time delay his reply, as though contemplating some imponderable factor. Then he smiled again with the creases of his face cutting new dimensions in his flesh. "Of course," he said. "Be here at half-past two." His smile assumed, without a noticeable alteration of his mouth, an impish air. Perhaps he had merely lifted his brows a little. "But I won't wait," he warned. "You may change your mind."

Martin was still tense as he walked across the lawn. It was not the tenseness associated with drinking or recovery, nor the chilling childhood fear of authority, but a tenseness caused by something unknown—an impervious, unaccented fear without a recognizable source.

He flopped safely down on the lawn beside Abbie.

"Mrs. Parker told me there's another patient coming in an hour," he said. "A girl."

"What's her name?"

"Mrs. Parker didn't say."

"I had hoped no one would come till we had all gone."

"Why?" Martin asked.

"We all get along so well." She looked away. "You know I've been here a few times before. It wasn't like this. You joked with the others but you didn't feel all together like we do."

"Come on," Martin said, "let's go in and wait for the new patient."

"I hope she isn't too bad," Abbie said. "You want to help them and what can you do?"

As they entered, Mrs. Parker said, "You can do me a favour by pushing that bed around. Put it on this end."

Martin and Abbie steered one of the high beds out of the men's ward, across the lobby, and into the women's ward.

"Has it got sides on it?" Mrs. Parker called. "This one may be leaping."

"She sounds almost jolly about it," Abbie said to Martin.

David and Helen came into the lobby.

"Someone new?" David asked.

Helen sat down without speaking. Shortly after, the new patient arrived. A car stopped by the porch and a man jumped out of the driver's seat. Dr. Reisner appeared in the lobby from somewhere. He went into the nurse's office. The driver opened the rear door of the car. A plump middle-aged woman with a firm, determined face struggled out of the low seat. None of the patients in the lobby moved or spoke. A girl of twenty-six or seven followed the woman out of the car. She stood rigidly and looked around. She was not drunk, she was sick. Her face was pale and haggard. Sharp lines cut from the inside corners of her eyes to the outer edges of her lips. Her eyes were bloodshot, her hair disarranged. She wore fawn sport clothes—a blouse, vest, and skirt. A green kerchief was about her neck. She wore nylon stockings and beige oxfords. She had on a ring and a gold watch. It was evident to the patients that her father and mother (if these people were her parents) had dressed her carefully. The father lifted a leather train case from the car.

Ralph and Evelyn came in the side door and sat down silently.

"In here," Dr. Reisner said to the man and woman and girl, waving at the nurse's office. It was possible now for the patients to see the real condition of the girl. Her neck was rigid but despite this her head was shaking rapidly from side to side in a fine tremor. Her arms were stiff at her sides with the clenched fists out at right angles. Her fists, too, were vibrating like her head. She was in the middle of a severe case of shakes. Of course she could not sign herself in, they knew. They knew, too, that if now she unclenched her jaws and opened her hands, her whole body would begin jerking like an ineptly handled puppet.

As the girl sat down being pushed somewhat by her mother, she let out her breath through rounded lips in a long exhalation. Seated, her knees jumped towards each other every five seconds. Mrs. Parker began asking the parents questions as she filled in a form.

"Goddam them," Helen whispered fiercely. "Goddam that doctor. Why don't they put her to bed with the pracky and ask their questions later."

"She's in tough shape," Abbie said.

"Why don't the doctor give her a shot of something?" Helen whispered.

The girl's eyes were unblinking. Her mouth had opened and now

her head began to move more widely from side to side, and every now and then to jerk upward as though marking a rhythm.

"Oh, Christ," Martin breathed.

"She hasn't had a drink in the last twenty-four hours," David said. "They must have locked her in."

"The damn fools. They could have brought her a few shots on the way," Abbie said.

Mrs. Parker continued to write and ask questions. Once the girl bolted up from the chair involuntarily and almost fell back on the floor. Finally Mrs. Parker rose and helped the girl across the lobby into the women's ward. They could see her closer now. She had a fine shape and must have been very pretty normally. She gazed at them vacantly. Mrs. Parker closed the door of the ward. Dr. Reisner talked to the parents a few moments and they left.

"You've got more company," the doctor said as he crossed the lobby.

No one replied. When he opened the door they saw that Mrs. Parker had the girl in bed in the hospital pyjamas. She went into the dispensary for the paraldehyde as the doctor checked the girl's heart. But the girl could not swallow the paraldehyde. She gagged loudly three times.

"I can't, I can't," she cried piteously.

"Get a needle," Dr. Reisner said.

"What are you going to do?" the girl asked.

"Give it by injection."

Mrs. Parker left the ward open after the doctor went. She returned to her office and began writing.

"Come on," Abbie whispered to Martin.

The girl was lying on her side, trembling, with her eyes open.

"Hi," Abbie said softly. "What's your name?"

"Alice Fairchild," she said expressionlessly.

"Hi, Alice. Get a good sleep now. You'll be all right tomorrow. We were like you a couple of days ago. Everything will be all right. Just sleep, that's all. We'll watch out for you."

"Thank you," the girl said.

When they went to the rumpus room for coffee no one spoke. They were appalled, feeling culpable.

They sat around the formica-topped tables, smoking, staring, fingering their hands or faces, scratching a tiny patch somewhere on their bodies. The despondency of the thwarted prisoner descended on them.

Helen began to look from side to side with increased agitation and

now she stood up and leaned against the painted stone wall. Slowly she began to let herself slide down. David jumped up, knocking his chair back. He put one hand behind her head and let her slowly down to the floor. Helen's eyes lost perception. They half closed as she sank downward.

"Get a cushion or pad somewhere!" David cried.

Abbie took off her bathrobe and folded it quickly. The others stood helplessly idle.

"What is it?" Evelyn asked.

"Quick," David said. "I don't want her to bang her head."

Helen's body now began a terrible silent twitching that mounted rapidly into stronger spasms. David forced her mouth open and shoved his wallet in it. He held her head on the folded bathrobe. Helen's lids were not fully closed but her pupils were completely dead, detached, unaffected by the force raking her. Her hands were clenched as Alice Fairchild's had been.

"She's had a couple like this before," David whispered. "There's nothing you can do."

Spittle began to run between the grotesquely protruding wallet and the corners of her mouth.

"Go tell the nurse," he said.

Evelyn left hurriedly. Martin knelt beside David.

"It will pass," David said, barely audible. "She'll be all right. She'll be all right. It's just a convulsion. She'll be better after. I could see it might come. She knew it might come. Pretty soon it will stop. She'll be all right."

Mrs. Parker came rapidly down the stairs and bent above them.

"Okay," David said. "I've got her for now."

"Has she had many of them?" Mrs. Parker asked.

"Twice before," David said.

The twitching came to a halt, began again, stopped, gave way to a long shudder, stopped once more. Helen moaned softly once or twice, then shook again, then lay still in a kind of despairing peace. The eyes became less hidden once more, less absent, less like the unseeing eyes of a new-born kitten. David began talking.

"Okay, Helen. I've got you. Take it easy. It's over now. Don't move yet. You're all right. Just easy, easy, kid. You'll feel better now."

"All right," Mrs. Parker said. "The rest of you might as well go upstairs."

Martin, Ralph, Evelyn, and Abbie went up and out on to the lawn.

"Christ," Ralph breathed.

"I've seen them before," Abbie said. "She'll be better now. Better than she was before. It's like something gets unblocked by all that shaking."

"Poor Helen," Martin said.

"The nurse will give her something," Abbie said. "If you have too many of them you can be subject to them the rest of your life, even without drinking."

#### 4

Helen was up for supper. Though she was pale, though her face bore a strained thinner look that made her features more pronounced, she felt improved.

"I knew it was coming," she said. "Well, it's over. Let's forget it."

She wanted to say what she was thinking: I'll never have one of those goddam things again from drinking. Never. I'll die first. But, like all of them, she was too superstitious to say she would never drink again.

"Was Alice asleep?" Abbie asked.

"No. She was lying there on her back, working her legs and staring at the ceiling. She was chewing her lips. She didn't answer when I said hello. Christ, don't everybody be gloomy because of me. It's nothing. It's all over."

An air of forgetfulness was re-established. They resumed chatting and joking. They were feeling much better, they told themselves. Tomorrow they would be going home. Then one after the other they found that thought disturbing and hastily discarded it.

#### 5

Evelyn and Ralph went outdoors again. The others returned to the lobby. Mrs. Parker had gone home. Scottie was on. She sat talking to them for a while. The women's ward was a dark cavern. An occasional rustle and a suppressed groan came from Alice.

"My father got drunk quite often," Scottie said. "But he wasn't an alcoholic. The whole family was glad when he got drunk. Afterward he was happy and full of energy. He got rid of something. It was good for him. But you people don't get rid of anything, you keep on accumulating all the time."

"You're right," Martin said. "With us the catharsis doesn't work." With us it's an agonizing, prolonged, barren cathexis, he thought.

Scottie left to go to the other building. They heard Alice muttering. The lobby was dim. David arose and turned on more lights. Alice's voice rose frantically.

"Don't!" she kept crying. Then she cried, "Don't let them!"

They sat or stood in arrested poses, straining for the next word and yet retracting as though threatened.

"They'll kill me!" Alice screamed, and suddenly she was standing in the doorway, her arms folded across her chest, advancing into the lobby with a backward, recoiling lean. She raised one shoulder in a warding motion and sank her chin behind it.

"They've got knives!" she cried.

Martin and David hurried to her side. She threshed her arms at the air. Her eyes were terror-stricken. They each seized an arm and held her.

"Don't hold me, don't hold me!" she pleaded. "They'll kill me!"

"It's all right," David said softly. "Helen, run and get Scottie."

"Nobody will hurt you. There's no one here, Alice. We'll protect you," Martin said.

She pulled and twisted and writhed against them, crying in fear, wrenching in a poisonous fright that could not be stilled. She tore loose and they seized her again. In the turmoil Abbie had approached. She was weeping and pleading.

"Oh, don't. Please don't, Alice. Please come to bed. I promise, I promise nothing will happen to you. I'll stay with you. I'll watch over you."

"Stop it!" Martin roared. "Be still, Alice!"

The shout seemed to stun her. She ceased struggling. She glanced slyly at Martin. Sweat filmed her pale twisted face. Her mouth was pulled to one side and her teeth were holding her underlip. Her arms went limp and she hung her head, her hair falling forward, blonde hair that had always been carefully washed and set.

"All right," she mumbled. Beneath her overhanging hair her eyes peered back and forth rapidly. "All right," she repeated.

Martin and David relaxed their hold somewhat.

"I'll take you back to bed, Alice," Abbie said.

Suddenly she flung both arms up wildly, twisted free, struck at them, and fled out past the nurse's office, across the porch, and into the night.

Martin and David, who had been knocked off balance, recovered



themselves and ran after her. David ran awkwardly because his shoelaces were untied. Stopping momentarily beyond the porch, Martin caught sight of her moving across the lawn diagonally towards the slope which led down to the far corner where the stone wall bordered the woods. He had to get to her before she entered the underbrush and hurt herself.

"Alice!" he called as he ran.

She stopped abruptly, ran a few steps to one side, then the other, as though faced with a barrier, then continued straight ahead. Martin caught her as she was about to leap up on the stone wall and plunge into the woods. She struggled furiously and tried to claw his face and bite, sweating, cursing.

He felt desperate in trying to penetrate her consciousness. David arrived beside him and began talking also. Alice stopped struggling. She was dripping with sweat and moaning. She collapsed weakly. Martin picked her up in his arms.

"I'll carry her as far as I can," he said to David.

In the moonlight they saw Scottie running down towards them.

"Is she all right?" she called.

"She's okay. We're coming," David answered.

"I'll go ahead to get something ready," Scottie said.

Halfway up the lawn Martin had to stop. He could scarcely breathe.

"I'll take her a way," David said.

"Jesus, the poor girl," Martin said. "She's not too heavy."

"They must have shut off the booze without giving her anything else," David said. "I won't be able to carry her far."

"Here comes Ralph with a wheel chair," Martin said.

"What happened?" Ralph asked.

"D.T.'s," David said.

They put her in the chair and held her upright while Ralph pushed up the remainder of the hill. Alice moaned now and then.

"I saw them," she said once. "They had knives. They'll kill you. My mother did it."

Martin picked her up and carried her across the porch and lobby. On the night table by her bed a hypodermic was ready, lying with the needle swathed in cotton. Scottie came into the ward. Martin put Alice on the bed.

"Just hold her arm steady for me," Scottie said.

With a sharp accurate thrust she drove the needle in.

"She'll sleep now," she said after a moment. She withdrew the needle and massaged the puncture briefly with the cotton. Alice's

eyes were closed. Her breathing separated her lips. Scottie pulled the covers up over her shoulders.

"All right, now," she said.

Abbie brought coffee to David and Martin when they sat down in the lobby. She lit cigarettes for them. Scottie returned from the dispensary and sat down among them.

"I'll have to call Mrs. Thurston about this," she said.

Helen shuddered and walked away towards the windows.

"Look," David said. "Why not forget it? Alice is all right now."

"I can't," Scottie said. "I'll have to report it."

"None of us will talk about it," David said. "Not even among ourselves."

"I can't take a chance," Scottie said. "Supposing she has another attack."

"Then that one will be the first," David said. "Think it over."

"I'm sorry," Scottie said. "It's not a thing I like to do. I just have to."

She stood up and started towards the office.

An hour later two attendants came into the lobby. They were dressed in white jackets and pants. One of them carried a folded stretcher. They did not speak to the patients.

"She's in there in the first bed," Scottie called to them.

They went into the women's ward and emerged shortly carrying Alice. She did not wake up.

"Well, that's it," David said, pounding a fist in his palm.

"Where are they from?" Martin asked.

"The state asylum," he answered. "I don't know. She's young. How can you tell what it will do to her? To me it would be death."

## 6

There was nothing they could do but resume their talking and joking, drink coffee, smoke, and ponder their own difficulties, depressing despair and enlarging hope in whatever manner possible.

"Let's go out," Evelyn said.

"I'm going to play for a while in the rumpus room," said Abbie.

"Good," Helen said. "Let's go. Let's wallow in memories."

Martin placed a cup of coffee and an ash tray at the end of the keys. Abbie began to play songs that she had learned back in the fifth or sixth grade, when she had worn pigtailed and could smell even such a faint odour as chalk. They were popular songs. She

knew nothing about other music. It was only songs that they could sing and that they heard interminably on the radio that her parents had wanted her to play. This music wove a sensuous remembrance, an almost substantial recovery of sight and sound and emotion.

"Evelyn and Ralph have left on a secret journey again," Helen said.

A small anxiety disturbed Martin's dull suspension in sound. Abbie continued to play. He sipped his coffee. Anything is good for her in her present state, he thought, even this harking back to lost time.

Scottie came down for coffee.

"Well, isn't this nice?" she said. "You all look so relaxed."

Her entrance broke their disposition. Abbie stopped playing. They rose and moved about. An inexplicable energy goaded them.

"Hi-yo Silver!" David hollered.

"Shhh," Scottie warned.

"What's new, Martin, hey? What's new?" Helen cried.

Martin grinned widely.

"Salvation?" he said.

Scottie looked from one to the other.

"I don't know what you need alcohol for," Scottie said. "You seem to be half-drunk all the time without it."

"I assure you that it is only in the evening that our behaviour is unpredictable," Martin said. "It is a sort of psychic reversion. During the day we are sober and repentant, though not industrious, and at bedtime contrite. It is the conflict of fragmentation and incoherence on the one hand and poise and stability on the other. Rock of ages cleft for me. A hymn for alcoholics and nuclear physicists."

"Ah, now you are getting serious again," Scottie said.

"How can you tell?" Martin asked.

Scottie left and they sat there dawdling, David rattling a spoon in his cup, Helen folding a paper napkin smaller and smaller.

"Well, we have to do something," Abbie said. "We're downstairs. Let's go upstairs."

"How ingenious of you!" Helen exclaimed.

Upstairs they slouched again in the armchairs. They could hear the clock ticking on the mantel. There was no sound anywhere. Suddenly the flute began to play.

"At this hour?" Helen whispered. "Indigestion?"

"Maybe he's hiding his pills," David said.

"What is it?" Helen asked.

"'Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair,' " Martin said.

They could follow the tune now, the floating tones settling down to them in gentleness, achingly mute somehow so that they seemed to be hearing in retrospect, as though the notes never quite reached the present but fell in soft pathos behind a veil forbidding duration. The doctor played two choruses and then, after a short pause, "Beautiful Dreamer." Some strange mood must have been on him to break his routine. They listened intently, for in these songs they heard their own fervid and hopeless longing, that unrealized and excruciating desire to dissolve an ultimate aloneness. Stephen Foster, untutored genius, alcoholic, separated from his wife, dead in the charity ward of a hospital, Martin summarized. In him also, had the good intent achieved only cruel results? The doctor played "Come Where My Love Lies Dreaming." In the three songs there was dreaming. What a terrible need to give of himself! And his wife, who must have been driven from him by his failure? What of her? Like my own wife? Martin shuddered. The flute became silent. All of them stirred suddenly as though released.

"Evelyn and Ralph have been gone for some time," David remarked.

Martin frowned and rose abruptly.

"Sit down," Helen said.

He looked at her with surprise and then smiled.

"Yes, of course. You are right," he said. "I was beginning to believe I was wearing a judicial robe instead of this alcoholic sackcloth. I have become fascinated with the fantasy of virtue dispensed by the ego."

Evelyn and Ralph had not come in when they finally went to bed. Martin felt a great revulsion for himself as he put out his light. Convulsions, D.T.'s, charity wards, he thought, and words. God spare me from my cleverness, he prayed.

## 7

All day they had wandered about, indoors, outdoors, holding hands at times, speaking of inconsequential things that were present or had happened long ago. They had confessed to each other the dread of returning home to the doubtful stare, the never-answered question, the frantic, lonely defence. They had laughed together at vigilant Mrs. Parker. The warden, they called her. She walked

about the grounds, hovering in the distance, to cast disapproving glances at them. Once they walked rapidly behind a screen of trees, knowing that she was observing them. They scampered under the branches of Evelyn's secret pine. In a few moments Mrs. Parker came along. They watched her peering about, somewhat dismayed, breathing heavily, a mass of suspicious flesh packed in a starched white uniform. They crept softly out and followed her carefully.

"Isn't it lovely out?" Evelyn called innocently.

Mrs. Parker whirled around, startled, embarrassed.

"Oh," she said. "It's almost lunch time, you know." She hurried away.

"Was it cruel of us?" Ralph asked.

"Oh, it was just a little game," Evelyn said. "Hide-and-go-seek. She lost. Really, I like Mrs. Parker."

Their intimacy flourished but they knew it would be brief and unenduring. There was no question of future implications. They did not speak of their families. The world was bounded by the houses and the grounds and themselves, but the sun was theirs, the lawn, the woods, and the bright turning leaves, peculiarly and inviolately theirs, given to them alone.

Evelyn looked into the live deep scarlet of a zinnia, holding the flower tenderly in the fork of her fingers.

"A dress of that colour would be startling," she said. "Imagine, entering a large room, standing there while all the heads turned and the conversation ceased."

"I wouldn't be there," Ralph said. "I don't belong in such a room."

"But you'd look so distinguished in evening clothes."

"I'll settle for the flannel pyjamas and our nice hill," he said.

But why not, really? He was over six feet tall, he had no stomach, his shoulders were broad, he had a well-shaped head, people had said he was good-looking. For a moment he saw himself as others often saw him. He suddenly felt an extraordinary sense of well-being. He looked at Evelyn, who was still bent over the flower, at the blonde hair settled carelessly on her neck. What is it she does to me? How does she give me back so many things I thought I had lost?

As she straightened up, he looked quickly about and then put his hands on her shoulders and kissed the nape of her neck. Evelyn blushed and laughed. She looked exposed and unprotected and he was rapt in a pervading gentleness.

"You couldn't look more lovely anywhere," he said. "I love your blue eyes. You know, I've never been friendly with a woman who had blue eyes before."

Their relationship, of course, was unencumbered with past associations. No memory of some bygone irritation could mar the touches of love, no indelible moment of awkwardness or pain. They were in a sphere of gentle discovery. No plan for the future debased the mutual longing of the moment. Their unquestioning exchange released in each of them some new or old harmony of desire and attainment, some magical recreation of a dream. Perhaps they had never had these personalities before and would never have them again.

They were impelled late in the evening to seek the darkness out-of-doors, the open night that held no accusing shapes and whose stillness and lingering warmth welcomed their lonely and earnest reach. They went part way down the slope of the lawn where they would not be disturbed but could still see the segmented circle of lights on the bridge. The slope was more comfortable for reclining. The grass was dry. They could see each other dimly, the face turning, the cheek lighted by a vagrant beam, the eyes in live shadows, a lifted hand catching a soft radiance. Evelyn lay back and Ralph leaned beside and above her. He lowered his face and kissed her in a gentle introduction, as if uncertain whether he wished a more ardent union.

"What is the reason?" he whispered. "Why this here and now?"

"Be still," she said. "It is all complete. Don't translate love."

There was, for Ralph, a renewed magic in the subtle tactile expression, a lingering over each new touch, an ordinate delight in the slow exposure and his restrained response. His own marriage union had become such a matter of hasty relief, aggravated by exhaustion, that he was amazed at this recapturing of a leisurely, reciprocal ascent to the fervent. He lifted his head and looked at the bridge and the stars and heard the hollow hum of silence. Mystery descended. Space widened in a hushed opening. Time swung slowly on the hinge of incomparable, outreaching love.

No thought marred the steadily mounting desire. Evelyn coursed back to gentle early love. Her exposure was timid, trembling, devastating, incredibly sweet. She was giving as she had always dreamed of giving, without hurry, with a grateful joy, receiving without debt, achieving a freedom she had longed for, a liberation from the engagement with the world's consideration and judgment.

And so the ancient and eternal, the new and brief act transpired, born out of a yearning unrelated to its purpose, called forth by loneliness and defeat, made gentle by a common despair, made clean by a backward reach to innocence in the vast ungeographical night.

## XIV

THERE was an air of gaiety at breakfast. Everyone but Martin tossed coins for turns at bath. While they ate, their clothes, which had been sent away to be cleaned, were laid out on their beds. Martin waited alone in the lobby, watching the flurry and the crossing back and forth from the bathroom to the ward and rooms. From the women's ward he heard voices and giggling. Then one by one they appeared fully clothed. They had never seen each other properly dressed, and they were embarrassed. With clothes they looked somehow indecently exposed after the long days in their bathrobes. With clothes they donned all unknowingly the auras of their former lives, the forgotten mannerisms, the timidity and pride, the feigned assurance.

Helen still had a rag-doll look. Her hair was short and in conflict, her complexion still poor. She looked briefly at herself in the mirror and snorted.

"Ah, I look better in a bathrobe. What can you do? It will take three months before I look human again. No wonder dogs love me. I supposed they're amazed and admiring because I'm walking on my hind legs."

David grinned and hugged her and ruffled her hair still more. Abbie's appearance was pitiful. She wore a black dress and did not smile. She looked like someone released after a long bondage. The fear, which she had managed to avoid for the past few days, had returned. It was set in her haggard face, it governed her faltering movements. In a few minutes she left the lobby. The others went upstairs to say good-bye to Dr. Byrne.

"It is graduation day?" he asked. "Do you want me to deliver an address? Some sage counsel as you go out to face the vicissitudes of the world? Always be sceptical. Screw them all but six and save them for pallbearers."

"Can we look through your telescope?" Evelyn asked.

"What do you expect to see? I know all that land. That's why I look at it."

"We'd like to see the bridge."

"I'm waiting till the leaves go so I can see the river," the doctor said.

One after the other they peered through the telescope. They were

startled and silenced. The bridge was terrifyingly close. It was, after all, just a painted steel structure supporting a long line of traffic.

"Be good to yourselves," the doctor said as they left.

They said good-bye to all the old, gently bewildered ladies. Mollie asked them to admire her afghan, her brittle fingers spreading tenderly the empty space before her. Sarah asked them to see what the girls were up to. Jennier showed them a verse which rhymed love with above and then, startlingly, luck with a word that had made her hand tremble so violently that it was hardly legible. None of them really understood the occasion for the farewells. Old Tom only grinned at them and continued to wet his thread and thread his needle. Denny had been told that a sister of his from New Hampshire was placing him in a regular hospital.

Martin wandered away in search of Abbie. She was sitting dejectedly in the rumpus room, alone, the lights turned off.

"Do you have any money?" he asked.

Perhaps she surprised herself in admitting she had twenty dollars. Normally she would have said she was broke, knowing that he would have given her something.

"I'll call for you early Sunday morning, about eight," he said. "Will you be all right?"

She shrugged indifferently and did not answer.

"Here are six seconds," he said. "Take two tonight when you go to bed, then one tomorrow sometime if you need it, and a couple tomorrow night. Go to bed early, Abbie. Remember that everything ends and changes. If you get too lonely give me a ring here. Is something special bothering you?"

She did not speak immediately, then she said, "I'm no good, you know. I've never done anything good in my whole life."

"I know," Martin said.

"I may get drunk again."

"I may, too."

"Won't you see what I am?" she cried frantically.

"I see what you are."

She lowered her head, sitting with her hands hanging in her lap, and began to weep quietly. Martin sat down and hid her face against his shoulder.

"Are you afraid of the two nights alone?" he asked.

"Not for me, for you," she murmured. "For you because of me."

"Don't be," he said.

"What is it you want from me?" she cried. "I have nothing. Why are you demanding something from me?"



"But I'm demanding nothing."

"You are, you are. Why are you playing at Jesus?"

Martin raised her head. Her eyes were still wet, one cheek was streaked. She looked ill and completely hopeless. He smiled at her.

"Don't say such a thing, Abbie. I need your help. Maybe I can help you. That's simple enough, isn't it? That we might help each other and have some little sense of love?"

"I don't know what kind of love you're talking about."

"Perhaps I don't either."

"A love all poisoned with pity."

Martin stood up and walked back and forth a moment, then he pushed her head playfully.

"Well, there, you see, Abbie? Already your mind is getting quite keen. You've spotted the sore point. So to hell with pity between us and within us. Humility isn't the absence of dignity. What is it, really? Are you frightened of staying sober? Are you hiding some last excuse? That it is too late, perhaps? You know you can get a certain kind of drunkenness out of sobriety, a happy drunkenness, a quiet drunkenness, something we might share together. Will you be a little happy? Please?"

Mrs. Parker came into the lobby. She said good-bye to all the patients who were dressed. She was bright and cheerful for a change. She turned to Martin, who was lounging in an easy chair.

"And how are you feeling?" she asked.

"Like a monk," he said. "I have never worn a robe so long in chastity."

Everyone laughed.

"I'm sorry our therapy doesn't include debauchery," Mrs. Parker said.

Evelyn looked at Ralph and burst out laughing. David and Helen smiled knowingly.

"Well, I hope I never see any of you again," Mrs. Parker said.

"A good blessing," said Martin.

"What are you going to do alone here?" Ralph asked.

"Oh, just think a little and walk around. I'll go home tomorrow evening."

After they had gone Martin went back to the lobby. He felt depressed and wished for the moment that he had also gone.

What will happen to us all? he wondered. And what are we really? The victims of our origins and the age? Or just finally morally weak and irresponsible? In the coming years the priest and

the psychiatrist can battle for our souls and our sanity. Have we been created as trial horses for the world's contempt and tolerance? Will we remain an enigma, the good and profound impulse inducing stupid evil and injury? But God is all. In the face of this, condemnation loses its reason.

Martin lit a cigarette and paced back and forth across the lobby. How they had all exposed themselves to him and how little had he exposed himself to them! It was over. There remained only the epilogue to be recited to the father. And what will I tell him? Only the facts will be best, if I can, just the bare story and the bare degradation with no defence and no interpretation. Oh God, why must I do such a thing? There was a quotation from Yeats. "Why should we honour those that die upon the field of battle, a man may show as reckless a courage in entering into the abyss of himself." He was unconsolated as he sought the out-of-doors once more.

## XV

MARTIN was waiting for the old priest the next day at two o'clock. As he had hoped, the day was warm and sunny. It was September twenty-third, a Saturday. The priest came down the stairs.

"Now, my son, we can have that talk," said the priest.

"Could we sit outdoors? The day is so warm," Martin said.

"Come, then," said the priest.

They sat on a bench at the top of the lawn that sloped down the hill. From this point they looked over the tops of the trees growing along the streets at the foot of the hill and over the housetops and chimneys into the far sunlit distance, far off to where the high arc of the new bridge marked the horizon. Here and there over the wide area columns of smoke rose in the still air.

"Father, I suppose you have surmised that I am an alcoholic and not of your faith."

"Yes, my son."

"Would it be possible for you to hear a confession from me?"

"Oh, no, no, no! You understand that there are many other preparations which must be undertaken before confession is acceptable to the Church."

"Are you familiar at all, Father, with the programme of Alcoholics Anonymous?"

"Somewhat, somewhat," said the old priest slowly. "Perhaps I could light my pipe."

Halfway down the hill an old stone wall emerged from some brush and trees. A cock pheasant walked splendidly out along the wall.

"Do you see the pheasant there, Father?" Martin asked.

"Yes. I've often wondered if they are as proud as they appear."

"Is it possible, Father, to see anything except in our terms and in relation to ourselves?"

"Son, will you understand that in speaking to you I might use different words than I would if you were a Catholic? Some few have seen things purely, I believe. Some very few saints and mystics, some few humble unknown men who reached a consciousness of God which is beyond our limitations and for which we have no words. And sometimes I have felt as though I was standing on this threshold, but I have never crossed it."

"It is something I, too, have longed for," Martin said. "But I sought it along a road of excess and down muddy by-paths, seeking a short cut to the ultimate. You say you are somewhat familiar with the programme, Father. Then you must know we have twelve suggested steps for recovery. All of these steps have found a place in my life except two, Father—the fifth step, which says we admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being, the exact nature of our wrongs, and the sixth step, which says we were entirely willing to have God remove all these defects of character."

The priest remained silent, puffing his pipe and staring out over the earth.

"There is another reason, too, for my seeking you out," Martin said. "It is this. I am intolerant of the Catholic Church. I do not like the politics of the Church, I instinctively recoil from some of its basic assumptions, I do not like the forms of its worship or the elaborate façade of its structure or its sociological aspects."

The old priest stared at Martin.

"To understand me you must know that I have been something of an intellectual snob, and perhaps I still am. I have been given a certain facility with words and thoughts and with this I have belittled some, browbeaten others, seduced a few, and have allowed myself a conceit which had no actual justification. I have constantly made the mistake of confusing cleverness and profundity. Expressed simply, I have been a wise guy. Is this the sin of pride?"

"Oh, I suppose so," the old priest said in an offhand manner. "Why don't you tell me a little about yourself, how you grew up, who your parents were, some simple things that will help me form a picture."

"I don't know if there are any simple things," Martin said. "All my life I have been plagued by God and whisky. My father was an alcoholic, I imagine, from what little I have overheard about him. He was a steam-shovel operator, moving about from job to job in the early years of the century. At any rate he got drunk often and was violent and my mother obtained a legal separation when I was three or four years old. She never saw him again. With a brother, two years older, I was placed in an orphan asylum in upstate New York.

"I suppose the central fact of life in the orphan asylum, at least for me, was the loneliness, a loneliness not unlike that which I was later to feel as an alcoholic. My brother was at first in another department because of his age, so I was separated from him. I used to take a smooth stone or a stick to bed and try to imbue these inanimate objects with a personality. I started at my fictions early, you see. There was this great outside world beyond the asylum about which I knew nothing except what I learned from Horatio Alger as soon as I was able to read. From the second grade on I read avidly. Every Sunday a visiting minister came to the chapel and I learned about God, or I should say I heard about God and began to create him as I wanted him to be. I have heard it said, Father, or have read it somewhere, that the conception of God a person has at a particular time is the conception he most needs. Do you believe this?"

"I do not know," the old priest said. "I cannot give an offhand answer to such a thought. It quite possibly has some elements of truth. But it is your story which interests me."

"Yes. Well," Martin said, "God, along with Horatio Alger, became very important to me. I had a definite image of God, a father image. He was tall and broad and wore a long white toga, and he had a long white beard that had waves in it and he was bald with a white fringe around his pate. I have often wondered why I should have imagined God as being bald. I prayed every night and sometimes during the day and I dreamed about the outside world. I prayed for childish things: that we would have fish cakes instead of creamed codfish on Friday, that my mother would come and take me home, that we would have a championship baseball team, and that some day I would be able to knock home runs like Babe

Ruth. None of the boys had money so one day a plan was devised to allow boys to earn a few pennies caning damaged chairs in their spare time. I worked very hard for several months, saved seventy cents, and on Easter Sunday, when we were dressed in suits instead of striped overalls, I ran away. I was, I think, nine years old."

"Is this really true?" asked the old priest.

"Yes," Martin said. "It is a fact."

"It must have taken great courage."

"No," Martin said, "not courage. Faith. Faith in Horatio Alger, not God. I must have read nearly all of Alger's books by then. I had a definite, practical plan in mind when I ran away. I would go to Albany, the state capital. I would buy with my little money a shoeshine kit. I would shine the shoes of senators as they came down the broad stone steps, kneeling there in the warm spring sun, happy, polite, cheerful, friendly, until one day I would be startled by screams and pounding hooves and I would race madly for the street, throw myself at the horse's head and stop the runaway. In the carriage would be this girl, in a wide summer bonnet and yellow curls, who was the daughter of the president of the first national bank."

"You did have a talent for fiction," said the priest.

"I believed it," Martin said. "I did get to Albany. It was dark and raining and cold. I had never been in a restaurant. I followed a man in and asked, as he did, for coffee and rolls. An hour later the counterman put me out. I wandered and wandered and late at night a policeman pulled me out of a dark doorway where I was curled up shivering and crying. I was sent back to the orphan asylum the next day and punished."

"What a terrible experience!"

"My loss of faith in Horatio Alger increased my dependence on God. God, I knew, would make everything all right finally. The following year my mother came to take my brother and me home. When I learned I was to leave the asylum I prayed earnestly for and alternately dreamed about the home to which I was to go. I imagined it to be quiet, three-story house of brownstone with a lawn in front, enclosed by a spiked black iron fence and perhaps with an iron deer posed in the centre of the lawn. It would be on Fifth Avenue, which, in our town, had the status of upper Fifth Avenue in New York. It turned out that I was to live on Sixth Avenue, along which railroad tracks ran, on the ground floor of a dirty three-story tenement located next door to a whorehouse. As a matter of cold fact, Father, ours was the only house within five blocks not devoted to prostitution. Does this sound melodramatic?"

"If it were fiction, it would. But I am a good deal older than you. I knew the conditions of certain cities at the turn of the century when such things were closely linked to politics."

"As soon as we reached home my mother pulled off her hat and lit a cigarette. This was in the early twenties, you understand, when it was still considered somewhat immoral for women to smoke. I was shocked. As quickly as I could I turned away and shut my eyes and prayed, asking God to stop my mother from smoking but saying that if she continued to smoke I would take this as a sign that smoking was not a sin. I do not know if I was practising conscious duplicity, Father, but either way my mother was to be absolved and this was what I really wanted."

The priest turned and smiled gently at Martin.

"In all your childhood, till then, had you had any personal instruction concerning God?"

"No," Martin said. "Only the listening to the Sunday sermons."

"It is amazing that God should have become such a reality to you."

"My mother turned out to be a weekend drunk. Fifty-two times a year for the remainder of her life she became terrifyingly drunk, maudlin drunk, violently drunk, sickly drunk. There were smashed dishes, threats of suicide, physical fights, broken windows, filthy curses, screaming arguments. I never knew a Saturday night that was not filled with dread foreboding until I grew up. I usually got in bed at three or four Sunday morning after sweeping up the debris, washing dishes, putting away stray pieces of clothing, and checking the gas jets. We did not have electric light. After supper on Saturday I hid the carving knife and the stove poker. Yet I loved my mother. During the week she was kind and gentle and constantly worried about our position in life. But I was torn between love and aversion, and all during my school days I lived two lives that had little relation to each other."

"Tell me now," the old priest said gently, "looking back to that time from your present knowledge, from your own admission of being an alcoholic, why do you suppose your mother drank that way?"

"I do not believe my mother was an alcoholic, Father. She did not drink in the morning, she did not drink during the week, and over the years her drinking did not progress. There were several factors that contributed to her drinking and which even then I recognized as almost legitimate excuses. There was the constant pressing poverty in which we lived. There were three mountainous

burdens: the rent, the store bill, and the gas light, which was often turned off because of an unpaid bill. And there was the terrible ever-present humiliation of making excuses, pleading, hiding, lying. When I look back from the present ease with which we gain our food and shelter, I wonder that my mother did not go insane with worry. During the week the strain and nervousness built up pressure until it was almost impossible for her not to seek some outlet, some escape to thoughts and emotions unrelated to her weekly burdens. At an early age, because of this, she began to live in the past during her drunks. She loved her husband, too, Father. It is extremely difficult for me to think of her husband as my father. Perhaps now that I have become an alcoholic myself I should accept him as such. When drunk and alone in the small hours my mother spoke constantly of him with deep bitterness and anguish. But her hatred for him was only a facet of her love which had never really died. Almost unconscious and in disconnected words she would speak with longing, tenderness, and love of the early years of her marriage."

"And God?" the priest asked. "What of God in the midst of this?"

"I found a huge tattered family Bible. In a little alcove between the kitchen and the parlour was an old steamer trunk. I put a shawl over the trunk and the Bible on this and here I used to go to pray, leaning my folded arms and head on the Bible. I do not remember what I prayed for except for the poverty to be less stringent and for my mother to stay sober on Saturday night, and for her safety if she did not. I prayed every night and almost every night I read a chapter of the Bible. My brother and I slept on the parlour couch. It opened out. In winter it was very cold because the dividing doors were kept shut to save coal. I remember that I would rush through my prayers and dive into bed beside my brother. Then I would lie there and think that such a prayer, rattled off in anticipation of comfort, could hardly be acceptable to God, and I would go back to my shrine, the steamer trunk. In bed again I would reason that the second prayer was only an apology for the first and did not in itself constitute a voluntary supplication. So out I would climb again. Sometimes I did this four or five times until I felt the prayer was properly refined and completely divorced from what I considered base motives."

"And you were how old at this time, with these ascetic impulses?"

"Let's see," Martin said. "I was in the sixth grade, that fall of nineteen-twenty. I had just turned eleven. I was something of a

prig, Father, I guess. At school if a boy cursed or told a dirty story, I would turn away quickly, close my eyes, and ask God to forgive him."

"And God? Did he still have a bald head?" asked the old priest with a smile.

"I had ceased to visualize him as keenly as I had in the orphan asylum. I suppose I still thought of him as a man. A fortunate thing happened to me the first week at home. My mother sent me to the corner store for a cake of soap and the corner gang beat me up."

"Fortunate?"

"Yes. You see, I would have joined them otherwise. Most of them turned out badly. One became a second-rate prize fighter. Three of them went to a reformatory. Instead, I went the other way, to Sunday School, to the Boy Scouts, to the YMCA. For some years my brother and I fought with the corner gang until the two of us could whip any three of them. In our own back yard we boxed endlessly, wrapping woollen scarfs around our fists because we did not have gloves. Later, when we were sixteen and seventeen, we boxed at smokers. I played basketball and football in high school. Again I practised endlessly, seeking perfection. I suspect athletics offered me compensation for my poor social position. I prayed to win, but I had, also, this great ideal of clean sportsmanship, this Galahad impulse. And I read. I read constantly, lying on the parlour floor, sitting under the back stairs in the yard, yearning, dreaming, praying.

"There is another characteristic that the orphan asylum developed in me, Father, at variance with my virtue and which was later to become more predominant. I learned early to circumvent rules without being discovered. I learned early the need for rebellion and scepticism. Despite the fact that I had heroic dreams and prayed and knew the value of love and kindness, I was almost completely undisciplined within myself. Thus, when I reached high school it was impossible for me to obtain high grades in subjects in which I had no interest. I was near the head of my class in only one subject, English. In other classes I was slightly below average. I never did any home work. I procrastinated for four years and graduated by selecting such odd subjects as Elementary Design for credits."

The old priest struck another match to his cold pipe and leaned forward.

"How old are you?"



"I've just turned forty-five."

"I hope, then, that perhaps it was a kind of preparation. My son, this is taking longer than I expected and is giving me unexpected interest. Will you wait here while I make a phone call?"

The old priest stood up.

"Am I taxing you, Father?" Martin asked. "It could be another day."

"No, no. You are intriguing. I'll be back in a moment. Look. Do you see the orange marigolds against that low grey wall?"

Martin was bent forward, staring at the grass. He did not look around.

"Yes, Father," he said. "I have seen the orange marigolds against the grey wall."

And he closed his eyes, praying: May I never forget them. The odour of burning leaves floated up from the town's streets. There was a stillness in the air. Only an occasional bird sound reached his ears. His telling of his childhood had left Martin strangely quiet within, somewhat melancholy, outside time.

He walked to the stone wall and sat on his haunches, holding the head of a flower in his hands and peering intently into the colour and following the serried rows of petals, the layers forming the full flower. He nodded slowly and wandered back to the bench, quieted and determined once more.

"How are you known, Father?" Martin asked when the priest returned.

"I've always been known as Father Tom."

"That is strange. The friend who drove me here drunk is named Tom. I am the one who should have been called Thomas."

"Ah," said Father Tom. "I begin to understand you a little now, though of course you warned me. Do not dramatize your humility into a sorrowful egotism."

Martin laughed freely for the first time since he had started talking to Father Tom.

"You hit me then," he said. "I was wondering, Father, just before you returned, whether I should go on."

"What is disturbing you now?"

"I wonder if I am not looking for a sort of spiritual bargain. Confession in exchange for grace."

"You have a tortuous mind, my son," said Father Tom. "I can readily understand how you have difficulty in maintaining your sobriety. I suppose you can rationalize a glass of whisky into your hand quite simply. It is not a bargain. What did anyone ever go

to confession for if not to obtain grace? God in his infinite wisdom will know the depth of your sincerity. But if it is absolute purity you're looking for, give up. Don't be so presumptuous. Not even Pius XII is absolutely pure. You are still on earth and on earth is a place for striving, for practising love and charity, for contemplation leading to reverence. Like the alcoholic you are, you wish perfection even of the spirit. Say rather: "Thy will be done."

"I went to work in an office on Fifth Avenue in New York after high school. I lived with an aunt in East Orange, New Jersey. I started as little more than an office boy at fifteen dollars a week, but a year and a half later I was earning thirty-two fifty and had a stenographer and two boys under me. For some strange reason the manager took a great interest in me. Anyone else would have been elated but I was completely dissatisfied. I saw my life expiring on the subway and train each day. I had a moral contempt for successful businessmen.

"I was really reading now. I started to read modern novels but allusions to unfamiliar names led me to the philosophers. I did not have any young friends. I was lonely. And now reading offered me the compensation athletics had. I was eighteen years old. I shut myself in my room every night and hacked my way through the wilderness of philosophy. I jumped without plan and without understanding from the Greeks to William James and John Dewey. I retreated to the Germans and sandwiched in Darwin and Descartes. My head, as you can imagine, was quite a mess, Father. One day I read Freud and the next day Thomas Aquinas. I still prayed. But, of course, the idea of a personal God was being assaulted on all sides, and one night I reached the great crisis. I wept and wailed, I actually knocked my head against a wall. I tried to marshal in reasonable order all the arguments for and against the existence of God, but logic was of no avail. I knew, I knew. There was no God. I knew it with every tear and moan and breath. At about four o'clock the crisis was over. Does it sound absurd, Father, that I knelt down and asked God to forgive me for not believing in him?"

"No, no, my son. To some it might, but not to me. And I know, too, that just as you might exaggerate a simple matter, you have here understated the anguish of that period. It is a sorry, sorry thing that you had no one with whom to talk. But the next day, my son? The day after the crisis?"

"I was lighthearted. I breathed with a new freedom."

"Ah yes, of course."

"Why do you say, of course?"

"A problem of such magnitude solved. How could you help but be tremendously relieved?"

"Yes. Now I discovered the poets, more particularly the modern American and English poets. I was enormously healthy and excited. I could smell and taste every word I read. Everything was beautiful, poor ugly trees, red brick slums, homely people, mud puddles, mangy dogs, burlesque shows, jazz--as well as the sky and the stars and the sunlight and the rain. All movement had grace, all sound was music. And I knew I was an unusual young man. With this exalted harmony I left the office for lunch one day and I have never been back since. I went home, packed my favourite books in a valise, throwing out clothes to put in one more volume, and I caught a train to Philadelphia with five dollars in my pocket."

"Ah, now," said Father Tom. "It was not quite as simple and unconscious as that, was it?"

Martin stared off now over the town and then he rose and walked once around the bench. He sat down and lit a cigarette and turned slightly away from the priest at his side.

"No," he said. "No, it wasn't. I was afraid to tell my employer I was leaving and I committed the first really despicable act of my life. You see, my mother had moved down to New York and my brother had a job. Our two pays were enough to keep the apartment we had rented and take care of other expenses. I think for the first time in years my mother was beginning to know a little contentment if not happiness. I told no one I was leaving. I argued with myself to find justification. It seemed to me that I was to be caught forever supporting my mother while life dwindled away. My mother had been a failure in life, I reasoned. Should her failure, then, poison my life, destroy and distort it, chain me? Why should I bear this, I who had come without consent into a world of appalling poverty and drunkenness? I convinced, or pretended to convince myself, that it was my duty to desert my mother so that I could throw my arms wide and embrace life spelled with a capital L. But I was cowardly really, to mention my thoughts and intentions to neither my brother nor my mother."

"Ah," said Father Tom. "Again you were alone? You spoke to no one?"

"No."

"There's the pity of it."

"No," said Martin. "The pity is not to know, really, right from wrong when you live in a moral world, not to know right from wrong no matter how earnestly you long for this knowledge. As the

man I am, I condemn the youth I was, just as the youth I was, I am sure, would condemn the man I am."

"You cannot divide yourself in two like that," Father Tom said. "You've done it all your life, outside and inside your home, outside and inside the asylum, and I suspect you still do it. I should think that now at last you would want to be a whole man instead of fragments bound by a body and a name. You cannot say, This act of mine was wrong, and in the same breath say, But circumstances conspired to shape it. You must accept the moral responsibility."

"I know," Martin said. "I am instinctively afraid of such things as duty, obligation, responsibility. Do you know, Father, that Alcoholics Anonymous is the only organization to which I have ever belonged? And that if it had rules and fees and obligations I would not even belong to it? I have been an anarchist all my life."

"But you have a simple slogan in AA, do you not?—Easy does it. Haven't you learned anything from those very simple words?"

"No," Martin said. "I guess I haven't."

"It may sound strange coming from a priest, but easy does it, too, in trying to correct your faults. You cannot tear out the habits of a lifetime in an hour. If you try to, you are apt to land in a hospital as something worse than an alcoholic."

"Thank you, Father."

"But work at it. As I listen to you, I cannot but feel thankful for the forms and discipline which channelled my energies and desires to a useful purpose."

"Yes," Martin said. "I suppose I had talent without tools, so to speak, and this, in a general way, is true of all practising alcoholics. Well, so I went to Philadelphia with five dollars, three of which I spent for fare. I slept on a bench in the North Philadelphia station that night and the next day took a suburban train out beyond the city, disembarked, and started bumming across the state with my valise heavy with Spinoza, Amiel, Tagore, *The Prophet*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Carl Sandburg, Sherwood Anderson, D. H. Lawrence, and so on. You can see from this inventory, Father, that I had been infected with the germ of mysticism. There was still this God-longing in me, expressed in pantheistic terms now, and quite compatible with the poets. I had achieved, emotionally if not intellectually, a whole philosophy. I was happy. That afternoon I took a job with pick and shovel digging drainage ditches along the state road. I put my bag of books under a tree and got into the ditch in my Fifth Avenue business suit. This is literally true.

"I settled in a small town of eight thousand people and was en-

chanted. On Saturday nights I hung out with the town drunks because their characters intrigued me. I sipped cautiously at improperly aged corn whisky, listening to their stories. Or I played poker down in the Bear Pit, a valley in which the coloured people lived. Whisky meant nothing to me. I was intoxicated with health and energy and the spring and a girl in my boarding house who was coming to bed with me twice a week. I did not feel this as a sin, Father. I was very grateful to the girl, very tender towards her, and I loved her in a manner far removed from a grand passion. I used contraceptives. I read poetry to her and she was kind enough to listen without showing her boredom. I even believe there were times when she was soothed by the sounds of the words. One day she told me she was going to another town to be married. She was very happy and I never saw her again. It is difficult even now to think of this episode as wrong, but I do feel a sense of shame that I was often overweening.

"On Sundays I went to church, each Sunday to a church of a different denomination. Here I was quite wrong, Father, and I should have known it even at that age. I went to scoff and ridicule in my mind and pose as superior to all this childish superstition. I am heartily sorry for this."

"What is your name?" asked Father Tom.

"Martin Gray."

"Do you really think you can stay sober, Martin, for a long, long time?"

"I am going to try desperately, doing it one day at a time. It has been borne in on me lately, and particularly since we started to talk, that I have forty-five rather wasted years. I don't know of a single person to whom I can point and say, I helped that person. It rather terrifies me, Father, to make such an admission."

"You are forty-five. Even with the physical abuse of drinking you should live another twenty years at least. Twenty years, Martin. Not what you have been, but what of the twenty years ahead? Are you married?"

"My wife telephoned me since I came here that she was starting divorce proceedings and has left our house to live with a sister of hers."

"Have you any children?"

"A boy of nineteen at college."

"Will you try to get your wife to return?"

"No. I think I have caused her enough unhappiness and discomfort. We haven't loved each other for years and to live with her

further would be an injustice to her and a constant danger to my staying sober."

"Tell me a little more, then," said Father Tom.

"For several years I worked at various jobs on a low level. I was a gardener's assistant, I worked at tree-moving, on various construction jobs, I entered a theological seminary."

"You what?" Father Tom exclaimed.

"I don't wonder at your amazement," Martin said. "I told you that I went to a different church every Sunday in the small town in which I had landed. I did, until I went to the Baptist church and there I met a lovely young girl who sang in the choir. The first evening I went there, it was still daylight when the services were over and I asked her if I could walk home with her. She said she had a date and I said I would be glad to wait with her till the fortunate fellow arrived. She said he was calling for her at home. I walked home with her. I don't know if she really had a date but at two o'clock that following morning, I was still sitting with her on her porch."

"Tell me about your entering the seminary," said Father Tom.

"It was because of the girl that I entered the theological seminary, or to be more correct, because I kept going to church to see her. But it is not a story of romance but of deceit and selfishness and the wayward intellect. We began to go steady. I joined the Christian Endeavour Society at the church because she belonged. One night the group had a debate on the question, Should the Church Advertise? I took the negative side and made a speech of some proportions. I had read much of comparative religions and social anthropology and I suppose it was a rather astonishing argument I presented. All the young people stared at me with puzzled expressions, as did the minister from the rear of the room. After the meeting he approached me and asked if I wouldn't visit him several nights later at the parsonage. I agreed.

"I had another impulse in those days, Father, which was to always welcome new experiences. I was thirsty for life, any life. I went to the parsonage. I dissembled. The pastor asked me if I had ever considered the ministry. I told him I had been intensely religious as a boy, which, as you know, is true, but that I had been unable financially to continue my education beyond high school. I was scheming, you see. I knew he had something definite in mind. He asked how I felt about it now and I said, 'It is impossible now no matter how I feel.' The upshot of our talk was another meeting and then a trip to a theological seminary. The president of the

seminary questioned me for an hour. I told lies. I wore a false humility. I wanted the experience of attending a seminary, nothing else. And perhaps I was taking some delight in my deceit. Most of the students were college graduates but it was finally agreed that I should be enrolled the following fall with an extended course. I was to be given small jobs, such as raking leaves and tending furnaces, to pay for my board and room.

"After that the town began to close in on me. It was almost understood that I would marry the choir girl and be ordained some day. I was invited into the more prosperous homes and had constantly to curb my mind and tongue. I had to be more secretive about associating with the town drunks, who were beginning to greet me on the streets with effusive friendliness since I was good for a pint now and then. So I left for the summer on the pretext of wanting to earn more money in New York.

"I stayed a little longer than a month that fall at the seminary. Both my habits and my mind had become too undisciplined to stand seminary life. I could not learn the Greek and Hebrew alphabets. I just could not memorize anything I was not interested in. I ran away again, again avoiding the decency of an explanation."

Martin paused and stood up and pulled his bathrobe together properly, that bathrobe that was at once the uniform of degradation and capture and the symbol of abnormality and escape. The folds fell in place. He blew his nose on a clean handkerchief. The sun was lower—atop the bridge on the horizon.

"The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me," Martin quoted. "This saying of the Zen Buddhists has always seemed particularly profound to me. I guess I've always squinted at God, Father."

"I believe you should thank God for making you an alcoholic," Father Tom said. "What else would you have but a complete and debilitating disillusion that might eventually lead to a dismal suicide? Drunkenness may very well have saved your life. Now, perhaps, you can give to others and love others."

"I have prayed for that. Well, one morning I met a literary agent whom I knew. She gave me some letters of introduction to friends in Boston. I went there and got a job in the shipping room of a department store. In Boston I met my wife. We used to sit at lunch time in the Public Gardens and the gentle fall sunlight mantled our loneliness. It was weather like this. We held hands without talking much. We ate our sandwiches and returned to work. There

was a sort of suspended time over that fall. Around the two of us there was a swirl of movement that did not touch us. We were alone. She had been a popular girl. Now she saw no one but me. I think, Father, that I married her because I was afraid. I was afraid of the emotional disturbance of causing her grief. But I had this gentle longing, too, to protect her. We gradually decided to marry and almost at once this damned rotten mind of mine began to kill what I might have loved. Dear God, Father, I destroyed her life. I damaged everything that was dear to her. This is the thing which will forever haunt me."

And suddenly Martin began to weep bitterly. He leaned his head in his hands and shook as he had from alcohol.

"Well——" Father Tom said, almost expectantly. He put a hand on Martin's shoulder for comfort.

"There can be no forgiveness for this," Martin muttered behind his hands.

"All sins can be forgiven," said Father Tom softly.

"I know you are trying to comfort me, Father," Martin said, "but it was pernicious and it stretched over years. What is physically beating your wife compared to a long mental destruction of ideals and love and tenderness and decency? The awful, awful corrosion of happiness and faith, the vicious undermining of cleanliness and pride, the malignant festering of distrust and suspicion, the reduction of a fine woman into a nag and then the iniquitous judgment of her as such?"

"Perhaps, my son, you were not wholly to blame."

"No, no. It was my fault," Martin said. "I was the strong one then. I cannot find any extenuating circumstances, unless I can say I was just plain stupid. She had love and faith in me and I killed them both with my own rottenness and desires. What else is there to say? I wasn't stupid. I was selfish, maliciously selfish."

"Tell me what happened, if you want to," Father Tom said gently.

"I'll try to, Father, though I really don't know how, because it was such a long accumulation. This girl, my wife, was almost completely unformed. She had no intellectual or social pretensions or convictions. She had only this awakening love and her physical beauty and her faith in the goodness and beauty of life. She was waiting to give herself completely to the man she might love. She was trusting. I don't mean to imply that she was unintelligent because she was not. She was, really, more intelligent than I because she could live happily within her limitations. More, she had a deep



woman's wisdom of the rhythm of life, if that means anything. But she was innocent, completely innocent.

"We were married and shortly after, through an uncle of hers who had some political influence, I obtained a federal civil-service job as a clerk. My wife continued to work for a year until we could furnish an apartment. It is hard, Father, to detail the slow corruption of a marriage. I still had this feeling that some great experience would happen to me, something beyond the normal limits of man's knowledge, and I had this underlying suspension and unrest. Also, I had that damn, foolish impulse to be utterly honest, at least in abstract matters, never realizing that my wife always reduced intellectual discussion to a personal level, as would be natural in her guileless state. Or if I did realize it now and then, being too proud of myself, too selfish, to curb my tongue."

A sudden sound from the hospital startled Martin and he stood up. His face was flushed and sweating. He wiped it dry with his handkerchief and was surprised to find his hand trembling rapidly. He stole a look at Father Tom. The old priest was puffing his pipe calmly. Martin sat down again but almost immediately his stomach began to tremble and his jaws were watery and he went to the nearby tree to retch once more.

When he returned Father Tom said with a slight smile, "Your soul seems to be located in your stomach."

Martin gave a sickly grin in reply.

"How simple it would be if all you had to do was to put your finger down your throat," he said.

"You have a son, I believe you said."

"Yes. He was born four years after our marriage, Father. We used contraceptives but there was a moment of forgetful passion. I was happy when my son was born. I suppose I lived vicariously a childhood I might have wanted. I built cities with blocks and toy autos and airplanes. I walked with him in the country. I read children's books to him. I sang songs in bed in the dark. I loved him deeply. My wife and I were peaceful and happy and the wounds I had caused were healed for the time.

"But the war came and I was advanced rapidly in my work. I dealt with war contractors and the allocation of strategic materials and inspection. I had a large organization under me. I grew important and conceited and I drank a lot because it was always available. I came home drunk often. Often I had to work late and often when I didn't have to work late I sat and drank in a lounge somewhere. Night after night my wife would be waiting. Until now I

have never realized the horror and exquisite anguish she must have suffered there alone, wondering and wondering whether I was at dinner or in bed with another woman. The periods of accusation and suspicion grew more acute and closer together, and she was justified although I protested always that I was an injured man. The tension was relieved only when we needed each other physically but the respites were of short duration. The job was really a great and continuous strain and I relied on whisky for confidence and energy and became gradually alcoholic."

"One moment," Father Tom said. "Did you ever accept any bribes in your work?"

"No. Lunches and dinners and whisky, of course. There were, I think, two inexpensive presents. But these were not for accepting inferior materials or for by-passing regulations, but for advice and guidance in the governmental wilderness and for expediting materials, and this was really part of my duties."

"Would you have accepted bribes?"

Martin thought a long time.

"I don't know," he said. "I've never stolen anything nor have I ever been tempted. If it was understood perfectly that the transaction was bribery, I certainly would not have. But it's possible I might have had a moral blindness that would have put a different interpretation on the matter."

"Were your family ever deprived of anything because of your drinking?"

"Not material things. Well, maybe my wife might have bought a few more things, but I never really spent much for drinking since I was not a bar-room drinker and was not particular about what I drank. I drank in self-pity and to recapture the glorious feeling of my youth. I hid myself, especially from my son, because I remembered my own childhood. I did not argue or shout unless goaded beyond control by my wife's words. I shut the door and listened to sloppy sentimental music and I wept for what I had lost. I did not appear in public drunk unless caught there. But I deprived my family of my sober presence when it was needed. They had to lie for me, to my employer, to friends, to relatives. I filled them with shame because the neighbours gradually learned. Several times when I was away from home my son had to come and get me and drive me home as I lay drunk on the back seat. I endangered other people's lives by driving when I had blackouts. I disrupted the household budget even though our bills were always paid, thanks to my wife's vigilance. And for these things I carried a tremendous

load of guilt which cast a pall over my wife and son and induced in me more self-pity that could be assuaged only by more whisky. Then sometimes I would revolt against the ever-present guilt and I would act arrogant. I was always adding up the good things I had done in a defensive manner, as if to imply that two good acts offset one bad act, in a kind of mathematical moral balance.

"Only lately in our book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* did I come across a simple statement which has haunted me ever since. 'It is better to understand than to be understood.' I hope I can remember this, Father. It seems very, very vital to me."

"Yes," said Father Tom. "To all of us."

"My wife acquired a circle of friends who, though dull, were decent, but they became tired of my opinions and talk, for in presenting a point I always somehow implied that anyone who disagreed with me was stupid. What irritated me most was that they all echoed the newspaper columnists they read and measured everyone by the amount of material possessions he owned. Even so, I should have been quiet and courteous. And then I might arrive home half-loaded on a night when we were supposed to go visiting. I had no friends of my own. It is difficult to describe the last five years, the days of suspension, the days of silence, the lack of understanding or tenderness between us, the silent meals and the closed doors, the tiptoeing late at night to find a bottle quietly, the hiding of bottles to avoid arguments, the lights on late at night, the shades down in the day, the terrible, clear, fearful ring of the telephone, lassitude and sloth dripping in the air, and silence with a million tiny sounds marking the decrease of life, the decay of the soul, the decomposition of the mind. I, the strong young man whom my wife had loved, disintegrating in a quick, bewildering fashion before her hopeless and loveless eyes. I don't know who can be more damned than an alcoholic's wife.

"And sometimes, Father, I plied her with liquor to arouse her desires. In the early days of my drinking normal sex was not enough. There had to be more and I led her to excesses. But then a terrible thing happened to me, as it has to many alcoholics. I became suspicious of her fidelity. I suppose this was a transference of guilt and also the subconscious knowledge that such infidelity would be justified. It was a persistent, fiendish suspicion that fed on small signs. Secretly, I examined the laundry and her underthings. I searched her handbag. Half-drunk, if she was absent, I rummaged through the house to find some clue to her unfaithfulness. The fact that sometimes I would berate myself and see myself as I really was

did not help. I returned to my distrust like a dog to its vomit. It was a terrible, terrible thing, Father, because I realized finally that I wanted her to be unfaithful—I actually wanted her to be unfaithful, in order to vindicate myself. How we alcoholics in our drunken state love to see the failings of others to relieve our own!”

Martin stopped talking. He had ceased sweating but now he felt chilled. He pulled his bathrobe tighter. When he tried to light a cigarette his hand with the match trembled so that the flame went out. Father Tom struck a match for him.

“Thank you, Father,” Martin said.

“Did you continue to indulge in self-excitement?”

“Yes. It ran a course parallel to the alcoholism and was inseparable from it. For years my wife always came back to me in love. I would stay sober a week or two weeks, sweating it out, and we would lie together and there would be this renewed peace and a kind of purification with the shadow of that old yearning and tenderness, hovering over us. But I could not hold it.

“One night as I lay asleep or unconscious, there was a kind of blinding flash in my head and I remembered the next day, or three days after, or sometime, that I thought as the flash came, ‘This is it. Oh, let it come. I suppose I wanted to die at that moment. I would have welcomed it. But I awoke in the morning to the dismal room and the remnants of a life. Oh God, Father, it is not only my wife but myself, too, I’ve sinned against. When I remember my fine health and the keen awareness I once had, that I’ve injured irreparably, I shudder at the frightful destruction. I did nothing with the gifts God granted me but tear and twist them to pieces.’”

Once more Martin wept bitterly, turning away and covering his face with his hands.

After a few moments Father Tom put a hand on Martin’s shoulder and began talking softly.

“I don’t know what to say to you, my son. If you were a Catholic it would be relatively simple. How alike we were, you and I, in our yearning for God. But from what vastly different departures and down what opposite roads we have travelled. You make me feel very, very humble that my tribulations have been so minor and that even in these I had counsel and help.”

“Don’t,” Martin muttered.

“But it is true, you see,” Father Tom said. “You’ve been so alone, so alone, all your life, and I’ve been so little battered by the world. Martin, if you have so much insight into yourself, you must have a similar understanding of others. If that understanding was

sweetened with charity, what a great, great gift you would have. Maybe until now that understanding was not fully developed. What can you do with such a gift, Martin? Think of the comfort and help you might offer others who have suffered as you have. It would, I believe, be a mistake for you to ally yourself to a church at this time. Your old reading would create doubts and irritations that would be harmful to you. But in the framework of your AA, which has no theology, you have a simple and complete guide. There is that splendid and profound prayer of yours. Do you know it?"

"Yes," Martin said. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

"Yes," Father Tom said. "And these other things that worry you. Don't be ashamed of having a mind and a vocabulary just because they may have brought you some distortion. Use them, Martin. Enjoy your thinking. But do not wield your mind as a weapon."

"Perhaps these people I have met here——" Martin said.

"Yes, but be careful," Father Tom said. "Help them—don't let them hinder you. But you must not be alone any longer. Seek out people whom you can love and help. Remember, you may be blest in having become an alcoholic. Remember the mystery that once enchanted you."

The old priest stood up. Martin arose and wiped his face once more. The sun had gone below the bridge but the sky remained light: blue and yellow and orange on the horizon.

"You are not a bad man, Martin. The things you have done have not been done with evil intent. It must have taken courage for you to speak to me, a priest. I am in St. Agnes's parish here in town. Come to me at any time you wish. But I feel your real help and growth will come from your own group."

"Thank you for hearing me, Father," Martin said. "It is more than gratitude I feel."

"I know, I know," said Father Tom. "Wouldn't it be so easy, now, if we could define God exactly and I could give you a chart to the very location? But wouldn't it be dull, my son, if the search were over and the longing gone and the mystery dispersed? For love is always a longing and a reaching, never completed, because with completion it would be dead. Martin, forget about your sins. They are done. Tomorrow is a new day for you and the next day will be a new day. But I do not need to tell you, you know it well, that your sobriety rests in your knowledge of your wrongs and

your desire to correct them. But slowly, Martin, slowly. Be at peace."

"Good-bye, Father," Martin said.

"Good-bye, my son," said the old priest.



## BOOK II





## XVI

RALPH had gotten a prescription for tolserol from Dr. Reisner, who had also advised him to take B complex vitamins for several months. He would make sure to follow the doctor's advice. As he rode home he began to think of the corrective measures he would take to lessen the tension that he felt had induced his alcoholism: less coffee, getting to bed earlier, perhaps smoking cigars to get away from inhaling so many cigarettes, driving slower. He would take a walk in the evening before bedtime so that his tiredness would be relaxed. He would stop worrying about sales. After all, if the company was dissatisfied he would have been fired before this. He would begin to read. He would try to teach himself and Anne and the children to appreciate those things that did not cost money, looking at the trees and the sky, listening to music, conversing. Perhaps he could acquire a peaceful integrity.

His home looked strangely deserted, although the car was parked in the driveway. He supposed that all the neighbours had wondered if he were ill. Maybe some had called. The children would be at school. He felt horribly uncovered as he went up the front walk. Was Mrs. Roswell looking from behind the drapes of her living-room? He was trembling. The door was unlocked. The living-room was dim after the bright sun. The television was on, an audience participation show. He saw that his wife was reclining on the sofa as he closed the door. The darkness of the room seemed to seize him.

"Hello, Anne," he said.

She did not rise but merely turned her head around to look at him. She cannot make even that simple gesture, afraid that I might mistake it in any small sense as a pardon, he thought.

"Oh, hello," she answered.

He walked over and bent to kiss her forehead. She remained rigidly still.

"How are you?" he asked.

"All right."

"How are the children?"

"All right, considering everything."

He sat down in an armchair.

"Well," she said, with an effort at brightness to dispel the coldness of her response, "did you have a good vacation?"

"If you want to call it that, Anne."

"There were some nice people there as patients," he added.

"All drunks, I suppose," she responded.

Ralph did not answer. I won't let myself get disturbed, he thought. Easy does it. I deserve this. No matter how provocative the circumstances were, it was I, myself, who drank. She has a right to resentment. My actions threatened the whole security of the home. But a lonely corner of his consciousness objected. Couldn't she for once now, under these circumstances, ask me how I feel and perhaps make me a cup of tea?

"God, it was awful for a couple of days—shakes, fears," he said.

"The strangeness, the realization of what had happened."

"I don't want to hear about it," Anne said with a shudder. "I should think you would want to forget it right away, too. It's nothing to be proud of."

"I'm not proud of it."

But how could he forget that week with its immense proportions? The six days loomed larger than years of living. He just couldn't erase it. Martin, Evelyn, the long talks, the yearning. He rose and went to the kitchen, made a cup of tea, and brought it back into the living-room. He sat down in abject silence.

"You come back all dressed up and rested as if nothing had happened," Anne said.

"What do you mean? My suit is pressed, that's all. How do you want me to act?"

Quite without reason he remembered himself as he had been eight or ten years before, full of energy, not resenting his work or helping out in the house, not worried about security, taking Anne to bed two or three times a week, sometimes in acute passion and sometimes with a fun-loving tenderness, always laughing about something, some small incident that had occurred and which he had elaborated into a ridiculous story. And then somehow he had become infected with fear. Anne, too. So that he could no longer attend public meetings calmly and he found it trying to sit through a moving picture and his work had begun to worry him. He found himself waking up at night to smoke a cigarette and then, if there was anything in the house, taking a drink to get to sleep once more. What was it? A final succumbing to the warnings that always filled

the air, insurance advertisements, medical news items and dramatizations, war-mongering, the statistics of increasing insanity, the terror of murder and delinquency forever being recited? Whatever it was, he had been filled with a progressive nervousness that only drink could relieve.

Now as he sat there he was acutely aware of the awful disintegration that had taken place within him and he knew that Anne had been witness to this long and unrelieved corrosion of his character. He knew, too, that she had been as bewildered as he and that both of them had, defensively, tried to justify their actions by blaming each other.

To make a gesture towards resuming normal duties he went to the desk to examine any bills that might be due. As he sat down and opened a drawer, Anne spoke.

"What are you looking for?"

There was a note of irritable impatience in her voice, more than this, some hint of apprehension. He turned to look at her. She had straightened up on the sofa and was staring at him.

"I'm just seeing what bills are due," he said.

"They are all taken care of, no thanks to you," she said.

"None except that I earned the money."

He began to turn over some papers."

"Don't mess everything up," she said. "I tell you, they're all paid. Why don't you go clean up your room if you want something to do?"

The front drapes had been pulled to stop the reflection of the sun on the television screen and he stared across the gulf of midday darkness at her. For a long time they had been seeing each other through a manufactured twilight. He was not immediately interested in the bills but he could not allow her to force his movements right away. Within the home she had been doing this with increasing pressure for the last five years. Now with his decision to stop drinking, to reshape his life, it would have to stop. There could be no more whittling away of his manhood. In this moment he saw his wife as a stranger might, her large dark eyes beneath the bangs she affected, her face that had once been lean assuming the fullness of middle age, her clutched vindictive jaw, her prettiness now being overlaid by some fear that was holding her rigid, her shoulders and neck losing their beauty in a growing roundness, a slight suggestion of humpiness, her skirt stretched tight across her full hips and thighs and over the lower roundness of her belly as she strained forward indecisively. Ralph shook his head slightly.

His eyes had become cruel and he was ashamed of his sight. He turned back to the desk drawer.

The stiff blue envelope containing the bankbook of their joint savings account had been uncovered. He stared at it a moment, wondering why it should appear strange, then he realized that the envelope was brand new. Idly he pulled out the bankbook and opened it. The book also was new.

"What are you doing?" Anne said.

The inside cover read, "In account with Anne Hilton." He flipped over a page. There was one entry, made the previous day, the amount five thousand, three hundred and twenty-three dollars. For a moment he was puzzled. The thought that his wife might have been left some money flashed into his mind and was dismissed. The amount was too familiar. It represented what had been their joint savings account, now transferred to his wife's name alone. The words popped into his mind: Insurance and savings scavengers. He turned slowly in his chair in a moment of awful hesitation.

"What is this?" he asked.

"I did it to protect you from yourself," Anne said. "You've taken out ten dollars twice this last month without telling me. How did I know that you might not start drinking it all away?"

It was hardly credible. His anger mounted in steps, from a shocking disbelief, to a trembling first acknowledgement of the outrage, to a more violently shaking recognition of the implication of this act. It was a final stripping from him of his manhood. At the height of his recoil a cold, bitter calmness stilled for a time his impulse to rage.

"In all the years we've been married, in all these years during which you knew of every cent that I ever earned and decided how it should be spent, there are now twenty dollars that you know nothing about. So you take advantage of my absence to seize all the money we've saved."

"You're an alcoholic. You don't seem to realize the position you've put yourself in. I can keep the money and sue for divorce and ask for immediate support. I've had advice."

"What, you've paid a lawyer with money that could have been used for new drapes? And now I'll have new drapes strangling me for another six months? Do you want a divorce?"

"I didn't say I want it. I'm fighting to keep the home together, that's all. You can't think clearly so I have to. You've avoided decisions and obligations. Somebody has to keep things going. If I was like you, what would happen?"

"So all I am is another factor, a walking pay cheque that you have to control. We started out with nothing, living in a furnished room, and now we have a home, a car, a summer camp, a bank account, and all these appliances which the magazines say are necessary, and somehow, to hear you talk, you've done all this by your own efforts. Maybe you have, though every cent we've got came from my earnings and I've never had any interest which cost money. I've never played golf or collected stamps or belonged to a men's club or frequented bar-rooms. I haven't even any friends to whom I give a cup of coffee. I'm only another factor in this tiny empire of yours. Goddam you!" he cried. "What have you done to turn me into a wretched servant for you and this house?"

"Don't holler like that! The windows are open."

"Sometime long ago I made a mistake by assuming we were sharing things when all the time you were sharing nothing. You were just taking and slowly crawling out on top."

"If you had any sense at all you'd know it was your drinking that's done this. What do you think it's been like for me, watching you fall apart? Hearing you puking and moaning late at night and talking crazy, not daring to ask people in, not daring to plan things, wondering if you could keep on with your job, everything slowly going."

"When we were married I never drank. I didn't drink for years after. But when I was discouraged and tired, or nervous and beaten, and I came to you, you turned away. You couldn't stand my having a little less strength than you thought I had. It was a blow to your pride, really, like cracked plaster in the living-room. You just got irritated. You didn't want any part of it. The children and the home and the possessions were the only things that mattered to you. A good mother, a really lousy wife. So I drank for comfort instead and talked to myself. Now it's all backfired on you. In the last ten years have you ever given me credit for one single thing? If I got a raise in pay, what did you say? It's about time. And you made cracks about my boss taking a month's vacation in Florida. It really pained you, my boss being in Florida. All I've ever heard is how terrible it is that other people have things you haven't. Is it really, really, so goddam awful crucial, honestly critical, I mean a matter of life and death, that you haven't got a new bedspread and new drapes? Then why torture me with such things? Don't you know you've driven me into a deep sense of failure by your continual harping?"

"Your mind is still drunk," she said helplessly. Her face was pale

and distraught. "After the rotten mess you've made of yourself, you attack me like that. I don't want anything from you any more. You haven't any rights here. I just want to make my own life with the children and you can do what you want. You're still drunk in your head."

Ralph sat down and let his head fall. He felt exhausted. He felt that at last something had been irrevocably shattered.

"Maybe I am," he said. "Maybe I was born a drunk and only accident kept me from drinking so long."

"Why don't you be a man?" Anne cried.

"Oh, good Jesus, that one," he muttered. His anger flared again. "Then in the name of Christ be a woman! Have some sense of kindness and fullness and gentleness. Give of yourself a little. Act like a wife. Sew a button on for me occasionally. Be concerned about whether I'm tired or hungry or uncomfortable. What are you anyway but the reflection of your neighbours' desires, poisoned by envy? Corrupted by the public voice. Oh, to hell with it. Poisoned by comparisons. To hell with it."

Anne began to weep quietly now. She sat in her strained position and the tears came down her cheeks. She did not hide her face. Her hands were folded in her lap. She caught up her breath in a sudden sob. Ralph stared at her, ashamed of her exposure.

"Don't you think I've longed for you to recover?" she said. "I didn't want to do all the things I've done, things you should have done. Some one has to keep going. I wasn't always like this. But you kept losing parts of yourself."

"Yes," he said with honesty. "Yes, I did. I know it."

"I don't know what happened," she said.

"No." He was wrenched with an awful pity. He did not know what gesture to make.

"All week the neighbours have been going past, looking at your car. I've been dreading questions. Don't you think they suspect? I've been walking back and forth and not daring to answer the phone."

Ralph walked across the room and put his hand on Anne's shoulder. She cast it off.

"Don't touch me!" she cried.

"All right. If that's the way you want it. It was my drinking. I just wanted a good time. Forget it. You've got what you want, a home with all the bills paid. I'll continue to work and pay the bills. But I'm out. I'm not going to be driven crazy by a long period of repentance. I've tried it before, time and time again, and all it

did was drive me back into a drunk. If you can't accept me as I am, then we'll go along as strangers. I'll try as best I can to stay sober."

He walked through the kitchen and out into the back yard. He sat down beneath the maple tree and stared for a long time at the fence and the fireplace he had built. His daughters came around the corner of the house, returning from school.

"Hi, Dad," they said hesitantly. They were ten and twelve years old, with his straight features and large brown eyes, and in this moment they looked incredibly clean and pure. He felt deeply ashamed and aware of his own dirtiness. It was with effort that he suppressed tears. God, I've hardly thought of them these last days, he thought.

"Hello, Shirley; hello, Ellen," he said.

Shirley came across to him, followed by her sister. In the long, condemning silences filled with the remorse and sickness of previous drunks, it had been Shirley, the older, who had come alone to him with some question or some shy little joke to ease his torment. He kissed them both quickly on the forehead, conscious that his breath might be offensive and still acutely aware of his unworthiness.

"It's good to be home," he said. "How is school going?"

"I got an A on the book review you helped me with," Shirley said.

"See my arm band?" Ellen asked. "I'm on the student council."

Time and time again Anne had accused him for having no love for them. Was it true? Was it only sentiment and self-pity that he really felt? But he did stand in awe of their beauty and their wild energy and he liked to play games with them and wrestle on the living-room floor. The basis of Anne's accusation was comparisons again, of things other children might have.

"Really? Well, that's fine."

How could I have done this to them? he thought. I can't lose them. No matter what I have to go through, I can't hurt them.

## XVII

### 1

THIS feeling of having come down into a valley was absurd—Greenleaf Hill was not over two hundred feet high—but none the less Martin felt as if he had descended from a considerable height.



The window of the cab was open. Warm, damp night air coming from the sea blew in on him. He had a convalescent feeling in which a certain eagerness stabbed now and again at his lassitude. The flash of neon lights, the windows of a restaurant, had a promise of new sensations and experiences. This was equally absurd. Yet he had a distinctly emotional recapturing of that pure anticipatory pleasure with which he had first come to New York as a youth. If he had closed his eyes he could have readily imagined himself back in that time and that city instead of here in Massachusetts on his way home from a drying-out hospital. His mind was rested, and despite the factors forming his movements and decisions--his wife's starting divorce proceedings, returning to an empty house, his concern for his fellow patients--everything seemed to have a logic that was familiar and was not confining.

He did not know to what to attribute this sense of newness. More than this he had not his usual tendency to uncover cause. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes and enjoyed the rush of wind on his face.

"The summer is stretching out," the cab driver said.

Even this statement had a texture and meaning all out of proportion to its words.

The cab stopped in front of his house, a two-story garrison type. His car was parked in the driveway and the garage door was open. He remembered that he hadn't felt quite capable of inserting the car in that narrow aperture. He stood on the pavement while the cab drove away, then he turned and looked at the dark house once more. A tall cedar stood like a sentinel at the corner of the sun porch. He looked up at the sky. The stars were out. In neighbouring houses living-room lights were on. Across the street he could see the bluish glow of a television screen. A lonely peace lay down the shadowed road. A cat crossed the pooled radiance of a street lamp. Martin's hand closed on his car keys in his side coat pocket. He jingled them for a moment, then he got in his car and drove away from his home.

About a mile away he turned up on to a dual highway. It is Saturday night, he remembered with amazement, the night when most people sought the unusual in activities and sensations, the prime day of alcohol. He left the highway at the Lynn exit and wound his way down through the city streets, through the traffic lights and the white, blazing store fronts and the multi-coloured neon signs with their flashing arrows and whirling circles and animated letters. Then he went through an area of dark, desolate factories where a single

pedestrian wandered at the foot of towering shadows, recessed and projecting, menacing, fantastic, with the unsubstantial and the concrete indistinguishable. The geography of my odyssey, he thought.

He found the street a few blocks beyond the factory area: three-story wooden houses with an occasional dreary tavern and a small, dim newspaper-and-tobacco store. As he parked the car and turned off the lights, he caught sight of the dark figure of a woman approaching. It was Abbie. She was walking slowly. Under her arm was clutched a paper bag. He knew it contained a bottle. He got out of the car and stood waiting for her.

"Hello, Abbie," he said when she was a few paces from him.

"Hello, Martin," she answered without surprise.

He approached her and putting his hands on her shoulders kissed her forehead. Then he took the package from under her arm. He felt the shape of a pint.

"I wasn't going to drink it," she said. "I just wanted it there in case I got too sick."

"I know, Abbie," he said.

"I didn't think you would be here till tomorrow morning. I had to get through the night."

"We'll get through it together," he said.

He drove out of the city to the Newburyport Turnpike and found a restaurant that he knew had deep booths where they could be secluded.

"Maybe I didn't even believe you would come tomorrow," Abbie said, looking across the table at him.

"Don't look so bloody sad," he said.

She smiled in return but could not hold her naked face up aware of her ravaged looks.

"What do you like?" he asked.

"Anything," she said.

He felt hungry himself. He ordered a big meal with soup and salad.

"Eat everything now," he cautioned. "Have you been feeling all right, I mean apart from the booze wearing off?"

"I guess so. You don't know what feeling is due to what."

"Do you have to go back to your room for anything?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I thought we might ride around a little and then go to my house. Did I tell you that my wife has left and is going to sue for divorce?"

"Divorce you?" Abbie said with incredulity, looking up at him.  
"What did you do?"

Martin lowered his head. He fiddled with his food a moment.

"I'm not what I seem," he said.

"Did you beat her up?"

"No. I'm never violent."

"What was it, then? Were you mean? Did you holler at her all the time?"

"No."

"Were you running around?"

"No. Not much. Not at all the last five years."

"But why does she want a divorce? Is she interested in someone?"

"Oh, no," he said. He was still looking down at the table. He found he could not look up. He knew Abbie was staring at him, just as he had often gazed intently at her.

"It has to be something," she said.

"I was a drunk, Abbie."

She did not speak for some time and Martin ate the rest of his food silently.

"Can we go now? I don't want any dessert," Abbie said.

Martin felt a sense of betrayal. He called the waitress and paid the bill.

"So you were a drunk," Abbie said, shrugging.

"Let's not talk about it now, Abbie. Here's a secondal. Why don't you take it now and then you can be getting a little sleepy while we ride around."

"No. I don't want it," she said.

In the car he put on the radio, low, to a station playing quiet music. Abbie leaned back, resting her head. Martin turned off the main highway on to a less travelled crossroad where he could drive without concentration.

"Why are you really doing this, Martin?" Abbie asked.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe it's just simply that I'm lonely, after all. In the hospital everything was exaggerated. It's hard to tell whether the vision you have isn't just some reaction from all the turmoil. I'm tired, too, Abbie. Weary of myself."

"Don't you hate your wife, or even dislike her, for wanting a divorce?"

"No, Abbie. I could go to her now and persuade her to return but I could never really rectify the damage I did to her. I would be less lonely and more happy and normal but she would continue to have those horrible moments of fear that I would start drinking

again. I would be persuading her to return not really for her sake but for mine, and the luxury of requital is something I don't deserve."

They drove on in the night without speaking. When the radio announced ten-thirty Martin began to seek roads that would lead back to his house.

"Do you want to stay at my house? Then we can sleep a little later and still get a good start tomorrow."

"All right."

He was glad that she agreed. The thought of spending the night alone in his house had been filled with dread. He needed company to impede the realization of his terrible failure, which he knew would return to him if he entered the house alone.

He wanted Abbie to realize that she was helping him. He did not want the selfishness and pride of unrelieved giving.

"We're a strange pair to be riding together in the night," he said. "For twenty years I've been employed at one job and on the surface have been a timebound, respectable suburban husband. For ten years or so you've led a wild, irresponsible life. But we recognize each other."

"I don't think I recognize you," Abbie said.

"And though it is strange," he continued, "it does not strike me now as illogical. A frightening thought occurs to me—that we may be the minute eruptions portending a mass upheaval. How long and to what degree can man be compressed? Poor Ralph."

"You change so rapidly," Abbie said. "First you're lonely and then you talk like that. I don't follow you."

"It's just a battle that goes on between my heart and my head, Abbie. It doesn't mean anything. A mild form of insanity, perhaps. An inability to see the proper divisions of life and to sustain an emotion. I hope it is a unique infliction."

## 2

She was lying in her slip in a bed he had given her in a room in his house. The door was half-open and light came weakly in from the hall, falling on the blinds and drapes of a window and catching more brightly a corner of a mirror above a low bureau. She found herself staring at the reflected light. Off the hall were two more bedrooms and the bathroom. She knew he was sleeping in the room next to hers. Was he sleeping? Perhaps he, too, was lying awake

in the strangeness. Why shouldn't he have to, the way she did?

On the bed table beside her were two seconals. He had placed them there. She would not take them. She had told him she did not need them. She had never taken pills except in the hospital. She had always been afraid of them. But she could not fall asleep. Several times she had been on the verge of taking the seconal but she had withdrawn her hand. What did he want, really want, from her? Specifically? She would have been willing to do anything, but there was all that talk, only talk, nothing practical at all. Booze wasn't as bad as pills. If it came to a choice to get to sleep, it was better to take a shot.

A clock was ticking somewhere in the strange house. Had this been his wife's bedroom? She had noticed that the closet was empty, and the bureau drawers. What could have been wrong with her to let him go? She would have fought for him. She would have put him to bed and tapered him off, and no matter what he did she would have gotten in bed with him and would have given him everything he wanted. She would have loved him. What had his wife done? Refused him because he had had a few drinks? Had she spread herself out like a martyr? She wondered what his wife had looked like.

But she did not dwell on this thought because of her own looks. Quietly, with the air of a thief, she got out of bed and tiptoed across the hall in the dim glow of a night-light to the bathroom. She did not close the door fully for fear that the sound of the latch would awaken him. She snapped on the light and examined her face in the mirror of the medicine cabinet. There was no change. Perhaps it would have been better if she had died. Died? But death held no warm sentimental appeal now. It, too, was strange and menacing.

She opened the door of the medicine cabinet idly. Inside was the pint, standing on the lowest shelf, the label facing her. She stared at it, reading the label, where the whisky had been distilled, the proof (86%), the percentage of neutral grain spirits and of aged whisky. The bottle appeared to her in the enlarged state of a close-up. As she stared she realized for the first time, fully, how destitute she was. Of everything, possessions, friends, money, desires. Utterly without. Of respect, honour, love. Barren, oh barren.

She closed the cabinet door on the pint. Nothing, nobody, can make me drink or not drink. What I do, I do. Even he can't stop me. But he wouldn't stop me if I wanted to. He asks nothing. She tiptoed across the hall into Martin's room and stood above him. He was breathing softly, evenly. Would he awaken? Slowly she leaned

over and kissed his cheek. Her pendant breast touched his arm and a shattering, devastating desire to hold him close seized her, not a sexual desire but a longing to have comfort and protection. She straightened up, stemming with effort the flood of emotion, gazed at him another long moment, and returned to her bed.

In bed she curled herself up like a small girl. If only I could, she thought. Could what. Could he new? In a store, maybe. She saw herself in a black dress with maybe a white collar and cuffs walking with a smile towards a customer. Christ, a sales girl! A bloody sales girl! Why not? She had a flair for clothes. She had always been chic back when there had been money for it and she had still been concerned about her appearance. If her eyes would clear up and her complexion. I could support myself.

She was crying now. She trembled and hugged her knees tighter to still the trembling. She wanted to grow smaller, to curl in and farther away, to find protection in a diminishment, to be somewhere far, far within the world in the night. Oh Martin, Martin, Martin, I'm bad. You can't know all the terrible things I've done, all the rotten things I've done with men, that I lied and cheated and stole, the things I've done naked, the things I've said, every single thing it is possible to do with a man and every single word ever spoken moaned at them. I wanted to win. I wanted it all, more than anyone else had, more good times, more booze, more money, more of everything, more days and nights, more suns and moons, and I became a sick, puking whore and there's no one I can blame and no one I can ask to share. Except if Martin will let me stay near him a little while and I won't drink and I won't moan when the doctor hurts me and I won't ask anything and I'll go away somewhere after. I'll go away.

### 3

The sun came in his room early but Martin did not awaken immediately. It was eight o'clock before he became fully aware of the increased warmth and the sounds of sparrows and of people walking to church. The first thing he did was to look in on Abbie. She was still there, still sleeping. He would not have been surprised if she had left during the night. He saw the red seconals on the night table and he was glad that she had not taken them. He suspected that she had lain awake a long time so he did not call her. She was lying curled up, the weedy mixture of her hair hiding most of her

face. He himself had fallen quickly and restfully to sleep and had not awakened during the night.

After shaving he went downstairs, put on coffee, and set the table. Then he went into the living-room that was bright with the fall morning, clean, colourful. He stood and looked around and it seemed impossible that the fresh healthy room had been the scene of so much of his late night drinking, that it had secret corners and niches where he had hidden bottles, that it had been a prison for his feverish pacing as he awaited a dawn that he at once feared but longed for because it would bring the opportunity of getting more to drink, where his wife had waited in sharp-pointed anxiety for the sound of his step at the door. Suddenly he knelt in the centre of the room and prayed.

"If it is the will of God let me remain sober this day, let me know forgiveness and be worthy of life."

As he stood up he smelled the coffee and heard Abbie's steps descending. She came into the room.

"Good morning, Abbie," he said.

"Good morning," she answered without smiling. "I smelled the coffee. Can I cook breakfast?"

He had been planning to cook breakfast himself but he knew that she needed a sense of helping more than he.

"Sure," he said. "You can find everything. I'll be here. There's something I want to read."

There was nothing he wanted to read. It was just that he knew she would be less embarrassed being in the kitchen alone. He sat in the living-room drinking coffee and looking at the bookcases where leather and cloth had degenerated to bright paper. I suppose I could go to an anthology and find a text for the day, he thought wryly. But we're only two drunks setting out to stay sober, leaning on each other a little, fearing ourselves and our resolution and blending our loneliness.

"Do you want the eggs scrambled?" Abbie called.

"Sure," he answered.

He stood up and looking out the window saw a woman walking by alone, on her way to church. Was her husband recalcitrant or hung over? he wondered. On her head was a new hat in which her confidence reposed like a nesting bird. On her feet were high-heeled shoes. He could hear the tap of the heels. The sound was more assured than her motion. The shoes were navy blue and she carried a bag to match. She wore a dark suit with a white ruffled blouse. He supposed she had purchased this attire with a sense of weighty

decision and that the decision and the clothes were inseparable from the shape of her life. She was a normal woman walking by on a Sunday morning but for Martin she was alien, someone living comfortably within the prescribed limits of the times. He went upstairs to find a sweater or a heavy shirt for Abbie to wear. We've become unfamiliar with our own habitat, he thought, and complete readjustment can never be realized. Poor Abbie, with the cursed blessing of birth caught in her. We're the unmoral, caught inexorably in the moral world, and only the avenues of exception are open to us.

4

"So here we go," Martin said after breakfast, backing out of the driveway and heading down the street. "A nice long day ahead, the sun shining, no cares—immediate, that is—enough money for a good lunch, the countryside beautiful, and four new tires. Life is full of blessings, isn't it, Abbie?"

"I suppose," she said.

He stopped at a drugstore and bought a bottle of multi-vitamin capsules and filled the prescription for tolserol he had gotten from Dr. Reisner. Back in the car he poured some coffee from a thermos and gave Abbie two capsules and two tolserol. She had applied a little make-up to her face but it looked unblended. As he drove on she peered in a mirror she took from her handbag.

"Do you see anything new?" Martin asked.

"I look like hell."

"You'll improve. Your eyes aren't as bad as they were."

It took a half-hour to get beyond the packed houses and out into the country.

"Look at the beautiful red leaves climbing the poles," Martin said.

"It's poison ivy," she answered.

"I know. But now, in autumn, it's repentant. A little like us."

"Red," she said flatly.

"Don't worry about it."

"How? How do you not worry?"

"By wanting something beyond the worry? I don't know, really, Abbie. By knowing that happiness can be attained? By feeling the hard shape of life, the necessity?"

"Shall I pray when it's going to happen, Martin?"

He did not answer for some time.



"No. You've never prayed. Why pray now? It's too easy in a time of crisis. A prayer and a curse then are almost the same thing, an expression of misery. Wait till you're happy."

His eyes began to seek the small areas of beauty in which to rest silently, the maple tree shading the corner of the field that had not been mowed, the dark cool aisle in the pines, the shaft of sun piercing the open-doored barn, and because he had not smoked since breakfast his sense of smell was acutely aware of the damp sweetness of the woods, the parched redolence of the fields, the blend of wood-smoke and seasoned meat that emanated from the farmhouses. A mellowness pervaded him, a soft identification of himself with the countryside, so that he did not want to remember the immediate past, he wanted to forget alcoholism, moral strife, and simply to find what peace the day had to offer, the natural sedative of the sun and the caress of the cool morning air.

"Let's not talk about booze any more today, Abbie," he said.

He stopped at a roadside stand for sandwiches and soft drinks to take along with them. Waiting, he looked back at Abbie sitting in the car, clad in the brown and yellow lumberjack shirt he had given her to wear, and he wished momentarily that she was his mate, for such a relationship would have suited better the sense of a natural pilgrimage that he felt. Not his mate with whom to lie (he was astonished now that both the desire for and thought of gratification had been absent for some time) but a woman who had shared the texture of his life and could know his needs. Then he felt pity for Abbie that this bond did not exist, a longing to dispel the loneliness in which she sat and in which he, too, moved so that the pity was for himself, also.

He found the dirt road that wound and bumped down through the tall pines and beech and birch to the lake he loved. The lake was not large, being only a half-mile wide and several miles long. There were no cottages where he parked. The summer season was over. The lake was deserted. He spread a blanket on a small grassy level a few feet above a thin winding strip of beach. The water was calm and clear in the gentle sun. Birches leaned over, reflected, several entwined like lovers. Reeds sentinelled the shore at either end of the small beach. Martin walked along, carrying sticks of driftwood, stopping to look at a school of tiny fish that appeared to be bass, following the darting movements of several small pickerel. He picked up a stone and scaled it. A redwing blackbird rose from the reeds. Across the lake the land rose to a pattern of far green fields, tilted to the sun.

"How old are you, Abbie?" Martin asked.

"Thirty-three."

"Are you glad you came today?"

"Yes. It's nice here. I used to come up this way on vacation when I was a girl. Then when I first got married we had a cottage on a lake not far from here, but it was drinking all the time and playing cards and who was stealing somebody's wife or girl friend."

"Let's pick up some wood for a fire."

Among the dark green of the pines and the birches with yellow leaves there was an occasional maple that had turned red. A crow cawed in the stillness. Some empty beer cans festered the beach. Martin tossed them into the underbrush.

"It would be nice to have a camp here," Abbie said. "You could build back there between the trees and put a little stone wall along the beach to stop the water from cutting in under the trees in the spring and to make the land look higher. And right over there, if you cut out the brush, you could take stone from those old walls and floor in a circle with a fireplace. You know, put in the grey stone and then some red secondhand brick in a pattern."

Martin was surprised at how quickly she had sketched out a complete plan. He could see exactly what she envisioned.

"You see things vividly," he said.

Abbie looked embarrassed and then somehow ashamed, as though she had no right to such self-expression.

"I was always going to do nice things. But I never really did anything."

She helped Martin erect a small square of stones in which to build a fire. She had a quick sense of shape and size, chinking the large stones neatly and rapidly.

"Will you have to go to work tomorrow?" she asked.

"Yes. It will seem strange."

They had their lunch and Martin stretched out on the blanket.

"Come. Lie down beside me, Abbie," he said.

He held her hand, lying on his back and looking up through the trees.

"I don't know what I can do to repay you," Abbie said.

"It's nothing."

"It's your kindness. Don't you ever get angry?"

"No, I guess not. Very rarely. Maybe I should have. Maybe I just avoided antagonisms when I should have faced them. I suppose conflict are as important in life as peace."

"Do you want to go to sleep?"

"No. Talk if you want."

"I don't know what to say. I'll have to learn how to talk all over again."

Martin closed his eyes. Do not turn my good into pain, he prayed. Do not let the intention be kind and the result cruel.

"I don't have much to talk about. A whole lot of incidents that seem blank. All of them together like a big empty lump."

He knew that she would fall in love with him and he could not imagine his having any desire for her. Supposing he could never have, while in her the love engendered passion? It was too late to withdraw without injuring her mortally.

With the sun warm on her and the occasional sound of his voice and the touch of his hand, she felt the stirring of the first faint sensual anticipation, the first soft longing. She moved a bit uneasily. She had an impulse to roll over against him. An image fringed her mind waiting to come to the foreground, erotic, his nakedness, the weight and penetration. She shook her head sharply. I can't start that.

"Is something troubling you, Abbie?" he asked, still lying on his back with his eyes closed.

"No," she said. "Just the nervousness now and then."

She would not be able to stand the sun pressing on her much longer. Oh God, it can never happen. It's something I've thrown away.

"Do you have any relatives at all, Abbie?" he asked.

"My mother and father are dead. I've got a brother who was somewhere in Nebraska the last I heard from him. There's some aunts and uncles around but I never see them."

All that family activity she had known as a child was gone. All those exchanges of letters, postcards, and gifts between nieces and nephews and cousins and aunts and uncles, the family gossip, the visits, the births and deaths and weddings, forming a network of social restriction from which, as she grew, she longed only to escape. Had it really been restrictive? It had been a world complete with rules of conduct and expressions of love. But she had chosen to reject it, to reject the familiar and the safe. Now she did not know even one single woman whom she could visit of an evening for a quiet talk. She knew no children to be fond of, no elderly people to be concerned over.

The sun was less warm. She opened her eyes and sat up. The sun had become pale, as if from pursuit by the clouds now hovering

over the lake. The strangeness returned to her, the utter loneliness again, the standing outside. How could she live long enough to establish the familiar once more? The familiar to her was in the half-fever of booze, the warm haze of an unreality that had ceased to be fictitious. The sun now was engulfed and the water became mournful. Oh Martin, she cried to herself in a desperate weakness that was unlike the flinty, indurate resistance she had always been able to summon up for defence. Even he could not feel the depth of her desolation. He was lost from her in the words of his own world, in the separate spinning of his strange desire. She withdrew her hand from his as she shivered in the sudden coolness.

"But now the sequence and the consequence can be seen," he was saying. "In the passage of the last ten days great expanses of time have floated by like clouds with changing shapes and shades, and I feel small on the earth, unimportant, and I am somehow glad at being overshadowed. It is nice here. The lake, the sky, the trees, are unimpressed with my ego and I can rest with them, unashamed and without defence because none is required."

"Please, Martin, can we go now?" she asked.

"Sure," he said.

He sat up and stared at her and then smiled ruefully.

"Have I been rambling again? Did you get lonely? Don't look so sad, Abbie."

He put his hand behind her head and kissed her brow.

## XVIII

### 1

"WELL, here we go again," David said. He braked down the steep road to the streets below the hill. "For the fourth time."

"The fifth," Helen said. "There was the week at Sunrise. What names these places have."

"Are you still shaky?" David asked.

"A little. Not bad."

"Do you want to stop at the Red Barn for a couple?"

Helen glanced at him with sudden fear.

"No," she said.

"Me neither."

"It will be the first time we've ever left without having a few right off."

David's reactions in the traffic of the town were slow. He came almost to a dead stop at each cross street and he shifted gears often.

"It isn't only that I don't want to drink," he said after a time. "I want not to drink. I guess we've had it, kid."

"Why? What happened this time?"

"I guess I'm finally afraid."

"We've been afraid before and it made us drink."

"Well, whatever it is, this time it was different."

"For me I think it was Martin's being there."

"Oh, Martin."

"Maybe something he said about God."

"Oh, God."

Helen laughed. "Well, at least you didn't say it with a moan."

"Oh, I see what you mean," David said. "That maybe God is not a bearded bastard with a gavel but some way of feeling and thinking. I never thought much of that AA idea of one helping another because I guess I never met anyone I wanted to help for very long. Oh, you know, I've given a guy a couple of bucks if he was sick and broke, but then I wanted to forget about him. But now I'd feel like a son of a bitch if Martin were to see me drunk. I'd feel I'd hurt him. On the other hand, I could almost wish he would get drunk so I could help him."

"Don't wish it on him," Helen said.

"Not even in a joke."

The trailer was in the chaotic mess in which they had left it. A stale odour met them. They opened all the windows, propped the door ajar, and stood outside in the sun.

David looked around at the other trailers containing vagrant lives insecurely boxed, at the scrub pines that seemed hardly more permanent, at the ruts of the cinder road and the washings hanging between trees. He shook his head.

"Christ, it's dismal," he said. "Even so, it's better than Scollay Square or the Conford Reformatory. Well, what do you say? Shall we start to work?"

"I've got to call Jack Fitzgerald in Revere about fixing a date for Abbie."

"You stuck your chin out on that one," David said.

"What can you do? You can't just let her kill herself, even if I didn't want to help."

"All right," he said.

When they had cleaned up the trailer they were both sweaty and breathless but somehow happy. The air had a clean soapy smell. They took showers and then made love and lay there holding each other in a drowsy contentment. A warm breeze drifted in through the open door in the kitchen. The sun faded behind the Venetian blinds and in the twilight they fell asleep. It was half-past ten when they awoke. They got dressed and went downtown to eat and then went to the motel on the chance that Mr. Woolworth would be around. He was not there. The room clerk told David that a manager had been hired to handle the cocktail lounge and the restaurant, a young man named George Hawkins who had studied hotel management at college. He was upstairs now in the cocktail lounge, the room clerk said. David's jaw shook a little as he walked away from the desk.

"All right, all right, don't get upset," Helen said. "Sit down here a minute before we go up."

"Christ. I come off a drunk and now this."

"Now what? What are you getting all in a sweat about? You're sober, stop acting as if you were drunk, like you were scared. He's just a manager."

"I was used to Woolworth. I knew what he wanted and what I could get away with. Without you working I was planning to knock down a little. There was a couple of things I could have worked out with the liquor salesmen."

"So I'll work."

"No. No, the hell you will. We have to change and that's one of the changes."

"Well, you have to accept things too."

"It's just that I'll have to get used to this son of a bitch and I'm a little shaky yet. How do I know what he'll be like? Maybe he has his own boy to work out deals with."

"Davey, don't you see what booze has done to us? It's made us afraid to meet people and new situations. We go around full of suspicions and ready to lie and scheme when there's no need for it. We make crises out of little incidents. We're guilty and scared. We hide little things when there's no reason to hide them. We can't go on like that. Come on, let's go up."

"I guess you're right."

In the cocktail lounge, which was fairly busy, David said hello to the bartender who was substituting for him.

"The new manager is sitting in the Green Room," the substitute said.

"How is he?" David asked.

The bartender shrugged. "All right, I guess."

The Green Room, which was used as a cocktail lounge for private parties and conventions, was off the public lounge. The door to it was slightly ajar and the new manager was sitting with a drink in the darkness, looking out into the lighted lounge. David introduced himself and Helen.

"Oh, yeah. How are you?" the new manager said. "Will you be in Monday? Have a drink."

"No thanks," David said. "I'll be in but Helen isn't feeling too well yet. Maybe you'd better keep on the girl you have for a while."

"Okay. But have a drink."

"No. We're not drinking."

"Why?"

David could see that the new manager was half-drunk. He was a young man, dark, good-looking, but somehow with an air of evasiveness and weakness which he tried to hide in a brusque, expansive manner.

"Well, we've both been sick, as you know."

"Drinking is an art," the new manager said.

"I bet it is," Helen said.

"You don't mix them and it's a matter of timing."

David raised his eyebrows at Helen.

"You've got to have a certain inner calmness," the new manager said with an air of profundity.

"I've always been a little nervous and tense," David said.

"That's the point. Most people get drunk on six or eight ounces. I can drink a fifth and go along on an even keel."

"Well, I guess we'll go along," David said. "Today is our first full day up."

"Drop down early Monday and we'll go over some things," the manager said.

On the way out of the lobby David said, "What kind of a god-dam fool is that? Is that what you learn in college?"

"So let him pump his ego full of Scotch," Helen said. "You can handle him better."

"No, you can't," David said. "I'd rather have some guy who was cold and all business. This one is going to be too friendly. Everybody's pal. He'll say one thing and do something else. I wouldn't dare take a drink with him."

"That's good."

"He's going to be full of schemes and he won't be able to work them without me."

"So you'll make something out of it," Helen said.

"I wonder what Martin will be doing tonight," said David. "Just sitting alone in that lobby and thinking?"

"So we're lucky."

David put his hand on her shoulder as they reached their car.

"Yes," he said. "We're lucky."

## 2

Helen did not mind particularly calling up about the abortion. She spoke with Jack Fitzgerald, who lived in Revere and with whom she had often drunk and occasionally lain after her husband had been killed and before she had met David. He was a fringe character who knew the inside of many questionable enterprises and plots without being directly involved, a personal, friendly, innocent-appearing young man whom everybody liked. In a joking manner she asked if there wasn't a commission to split. Jack laughed, too. But when he called her back after arrangements had been made, he offered her a serious proposal that sounded much like being granted an exclusive sales territory in New Hampshire.

"No thanks," Helen said. "I'm joining the Young Mothers' Club here."

"How is your boy?" Jack asked.

"Oh, fine," she said, ashamed to admit that she did not really know.

"How are you doing with the bottle?"

"We're not drinking right now."

"That's fine, that's fine. Well, say hello to Davey for me and let me know if I can help you again any time."

After she hung up, Helen thought over the conversation and then was astonished at the casual, friendly manner in which she had arranged for an abortion. Young Mothers' Club! How could she ever belong to anything? She remembered the word *God*, Martin's voice saying it is all part of it, all necessary, both the good and evil, were participants in a pageant and perhaps we've been assigned privileged roles. What awful stuff he sometimes spouted, she thought with a smile and with a warm longing to see him again.

He came with Abbie late Sunday afternoon. Helen felt like a young housewife awaiting important guests for tea. The trailer



was clean and shining. She had coffee ready to put on. She had made sandwiches and bought a cake, since she did not know how to bake. She even became a little irritated with David, who was sprawled on the bed in a mess of Sunday papers. He was still in his pyjamas.

"Come on, come on, get dressed," she urged.

"What for?" David asked. "We all lived together in pyjamas for a week. I mean, they'll feel more at home."

But he got up and dressed.

She was outside when Martin drove up with Abbie.

"You were standing there like a motion picture pioneer wife scanning the horizon for hope with her apron flapping in the rain-laden wind," Martin said. "American classic."

"I was feeling like it, too," she said. "How are you, Abbie? You're looking much better. Come on inside. It's small but we can all sit down somewhere. What's new, Martin?"

"Nothing, nothing. We had a little picnic, that's all."

Helen made the coffee and served the sandwiches and cake and David spoke about his new boss and they talked of Greenleaf Hill in a pleasingly dull way. They had a sense of belonging together and the things they did not mention were like family vicissitudes intentionally avoided because they would be corrected in due course at a later time. So they avoided as long as possible the subject of Abbie's abortion. Finally, however, a silence that accumulated weight and meaning forced Martin to speak.

"Did you call your friend?" he asked Helen.

"Yes. It's all arranged," she said.

Abbie looked down at the floor, like a patient overhearing a consultation. David got up to reheat the coffee. Martin offered Abbie a cigarette and lighted it for her.

"Thank you," she said in a strange, formal tone.

"Well?" Martin said, turning back to Helen.

"The doctor can take care of it a week from Friday," Helen said. She hesitated to continue because now, in the face of the quiet day, the details assumed a sinister import.

"Where does Abbie go?" Martin asked.

"She's to register at the Hotel Margrave sometime before noon under the name of Florence Provencher." Helen realized suddenly that she was speaking of Abbie as if she was not present. She turned to her now and continued. "You should get undressed and go to bed, Abbie. Sometime between noon and two o'clock the doctor will come. You are to have four hundred and fifty dollars in nothing

larger than ten dollar bills in an envelope on the bureau. The doctor will want you to remain in the room till the next morning but you can suit yourself about that."

"Supposing I get very bad after he leaves?" Abbie asked.

"You won't. You'll be all right," Helen said, looking away.

"But supposing I do?"

"You won't." Helen lighted a cigarette of her own. She made a little fuss about finding a match.

"You'll be all right," Martin said. "I'll get out of work early and come over and stay with you."

Abbie turned swiftly and glared at him.

"No," she protested fiercely. "You're not to come."

"Why?" he asked.

"I don't want you there, that's all."

Helen looked at Abbie with pity and then lowered her head lest she should see it written so plainly on her face. Was her objection a desire to protect Martin against any consequences? Perhaps, too, she did not want him to be witness to this final humiliation. She had not heard Abbie assert herself in any manner contrary to Martin's suggestions before. It had been as if her character was a completely drained vessel, capable only of receiving. But now some desire of her own was motivating her. Martin gazed sadly at her.

"But you can't spend all that time alone," he said.

Abbie stood up suddenly as if she wanted to walk around but in the trailer there was no space for free movement. She turned around from them, standing beside her chair. She lowered her head and began to weep.

"Come on," David said to Martin. "Let's go outside for a while."

He opened the door and Martin stepped out. David walked over to his car and leaned against it, smoking and looking at the scrub pine.

"Sometimes you're an awful damn fool," he said. "You don't always tell a woman what you intend to do. Don't you see that she doesn't want you to be part of such a thing? It's not your blame and you're giving her charity and no matter what anyone says charity is cruel."

"It isn't charity like that," Martin said.

"Not for you but how do you know what it is for her? She loves you some way, or maybe she's scared of you, but she doesn't want you to be part of this, that's all. If she had her way and could, she'd disappear for a couple of months and then come back when the Christy mess was buried. She's all bewildered, with this, with try-

ing to stop drinking, with you. You're enough to bewilder anyone without anything else. It's all right to help her, but leave her a little part of herself, even if it's not very good."

"Maybe it would have been better if I had just said to hell with the whole thing. Maybe I should have let her swallow the capsules, let her die. What would it have mattered finally? There was no longer anyone she could injure. What was she? A cipher. Perhaps now, living, she will cause harm to others. But you can't let human life perish when a small act can prevent it, and I can't help but believe that it cannot be wrong to help someone even if, as now, you have to take the risk of breaking the laws of society. But I'm not really as unselfish as I might appear. Pure charity doesn't exist. What have I left? The prison of my skull. I'm allowing myself the luxury of giving and I'm hoping to be paid for it."

"By what?" David said.

"Staying sober. I'm hoping for an intellectual and spiritual amnesty. Maybe the most tragic urge in man is a longing for an ultimate, Davey. It makes one man a Communist, another a poet, another a saint, another a criminal. And then there are poor bastards like me who became alcoholics and may see an abortion as a step towards the goal."

"Well, I don't see the things you do. I just want to stay sober. I've had it."

"Well, I just want to help Abbie. I'm fond of her some way."

"So I understand that. We help each other and we all stay sober."

Martin grinned. "You sound like a good AA member, Davey."

### 3

Inside the trailer Helen misinterpreted Abbie's tears in that she assumed physical fear caused them. She poured a cup of coffee for her while she talked and when she sat down again Abbie had ceased crying.

"The doctor is good," Helen said. "He's young and needs money because his practice is limited yet, that's all. There won't be too much pain but you'll be a little weak. You probably won't have any more pain than you've had lots of months."

"Oh good Jesus, it isn't pain, it isn't even dying that scares me," Abbie said.

Her voice was freer and harsher than it was when she spoke to Martin, as if with him she was always on guard. Helen noticed it.

"What are you worrying about then?" she asked.

"I don't know," Abbie said. "You know me, Helen. I don't have to fake with you. I've been a drunk and a whore."

The word struck Helen. Despite her own promiscuity she resented as a woman the use of the word applied to any woman. She turned away a little in disavowal.

"Don't beat yourself," she said.

"Maybe I want to change and this seems a poor way to start. I want to be clean and I have to start by being dirty."

Helen snorted. "Clean, dirty, what's the difference? No difference to me or Davey or Martin. So three months from now you're clean."

"Three months?" Abbie questioned.

"I was thinking of booze and somehow three months always pops into my mind. The booze is the big thing for you, Abbie."

"Maybe. Oh, if it only was that instead of all the other things. If only I could get a clean start instead of putting this thing on Martin."

They smoked awhile in silence. Abbie got up again and looked out across the cinder road to where Martin and David were standing under the low pines. Martin was reaching for a cigarette in the breast pocket of the bright lumber jacket he wore as he peered intently with a half-smile at David. At this distant sight of him in his separateness she breathed with a quick intensity and murmured, "Oh Lord, oh Lord."

"I'm going to get trapped," she said, turning back to Helen and reseating herself.

"Trapped?" Helen said.

"It's Martin. It's his gentleness and kindness. He's not faking, Helen. It's there and I feel like a bitch all the time. It's his goodness."

"And his good looks," Helen said.

"Oh, it's not that," Abbie protested. "He could forgive you anything, not like a priest because it's his job, but like your lover or son because you would know it was him you had injured, he had felt the pain, and still his love and tenderness would make him accept it."

"You're a little screwed up," Helen said.

"What will I do, Helen? If it was anyone else I'd work him for all he was worth but with him I don't know how to act. I don't know what to do. I'm lost. I'm like a schoolgirl. I'm afraid I'll make some big humiliating mistake that will ruin me. I'm afraid of him and I don't want to be away from him. I'm afraid of what he'll make me do. What does he want from me? I've got nothing."

Abbie began to weep again.

"Oh Jesus, quit crying," Helen said gently. "Quit trying to dig a hole."

"I know I'm only some kind of a trial horse for him. But I have to be more than that."

"Oh, cut it out. What you forget is that Martin is an alcoholic. He's shivered and puked like you have, he's had the shakes and heaves and has wept in self-pity like you. He's not a saint without a stink. There's something you have he needs. What do you care what it is?"

"But he's not just those things," Abbie protested.

"No. Maybe he's come out of it with a little more knowledge than we have. Or maybe he had more going into it. Anyway, no matter what he is otherwise, with us he is honest and he loves us some way. Love? What a word. Trust him, Abbie, and don't beat yourself. Let him help you. He won't ask anything of you. What is hurting you is not what he will make you do but what you will make yourself do."

"I'm scared I'll fall in love with him and I've got nothing left."

Helen stood up and put her hand on Abbie's shoulder.

"If you're scared, it's too late," she said. "You'll just have to ride with it. What else can you do?"

"It isn't his helping me. It's the way he looks and talks and sometimes he seems lonely and helpless and I ache. Oh, Jesus, Jesus, look what I've done with my looks. He'll never see me as a woman. I can't even give anything to anyone except as a woman."

"If you stay sober and live regularly your looks will be all right," Helen said. "You're young yet. Don't worry about it. You've got a good shape. I'd worry about the rest of you. Stay away from the booze. Relax a little, for Christ's sake, Abbie. Just ride along. Just go for the ride."

## XIX

### 1

ON THE Wednesday morning following her return Evelyn Johnson sat outside her kitchen having coffee. The morning was bright though chill. She had put on a light tan coat over her pyjamas.

Leaves covered the lawn, the yellow of poplars, the red of maples lying on the short clipped grass. There were drops of water in some of the leaves though it hadn't rained. Within the enclosure of the yard was a warm, immediate dampness that was pierced by a dry, distant coldness coming from the northwest, and this mingling of the two atmospheres reflected the mixture of strangeness and familiarity she experienced as she sat there. She lifted her light hair back over one ear in a typical gesture but with the other hand she tapped her cigarette nervously in the ash tray on the bright red metal table. She was receptive to the warmth of the sun and the still beauty of the yard, but within her was the ache of unfulfilment caused by the absence of alcohol and the affection she craved.

At ten-thirty the phone rang. She had not yet gotten over the sudden fear this caused. She hesitated before answering it. I can't avoid things, she thought. It was Mary J. and she felt vastly relieved.

"How are you doing?" Mary asked.

"Oh, all right," she answered.

"Have you been uptown since you were home?"

"Yes," she said.

"Did you make out all right?"

Evelyn knew the implication. She had not bought a bottle.

"Yes," she said.

"Good. I was planning on asking you to go to a meeting tonight but something has come up. Will you be all right for another day? How is Robert?"

"Oh, just the same. Don't worry about me, Mary. I'll be all right. For a while, at least."

"Have you been reading the book at all?"

She had left Evelyn what was called the big book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Evelyn had glanced into it but had felt incapable of reading.

"Not yet."

"Well, when you feel like it. You'll learn a lot about yourself. Why don't you come over and have lunch with me Friday? Or better yet I'll pick you up and we'll go out somewhere."

"All right."

Evelyn hung up and was sitting reflectively when the phone rang again. It was Mrs. Dennison.

"Oh, Evelyn!" she exclaimed. "How are you? I called last week and Robert said you were away for a check-up in some New York clinic. What's the matter, aren't our New England hospitals good enough for you?"

"I had been there before."

"What's wrong?"

"There's nothing wrong."

"Well, the reason I'm calling, I just wanted to make sure I could count on you for the Red Cross drive. I know you'll want to help as usual. It's the regular streets you've covered before, only this year we want to see if we can boost up the contributions. After all, this is a fairly prosperous neighbourhood and we've never really gotten more than the ordinary sections. So you can pick up the stickers and so forth any time. We'll have a little talk about it."

"You'll have to get some one else this year," Evelyn said bluntly.

There was a long pause.

"But I've been counting on you."

"I know. But let some one else work for a change."

"Aren't you feeling well?"

"I'm feeling perfectly well."

"But what's the matter?"

"I've collected for five years now. This year I'm not going to."

"But who can I get?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Why don't you try Mrs. Calvin?"

Mrs. Calvin was Mrs. Dennison's sister-in-law. Evelyn knew they loathed each other.

"She's always so busy with other things."

"Well, I have other interests, too. The door bell is ringing. I have to hang up."

The lies and the suppressed anger caused by the effort at honesty left Evelyn trembling. If she calls back, I'll scream at her, she thought. She did not know why she disliked Mrs. Dennison so intensely. Perhaps it was because she had for so long forced her to do things that she didn't wish to do.

The phone rang again. Ah, she thought vindictively. But it was not Mrs. Dennison. She did not recognize the voice at first. It was Martin.

"Oh, Martin, Martin," she cried. "Oh, it's good to hear from you. How are you?"

"Busy at work."

"I wondered whether you would ever call, whether I would ever hear from any of you again."

She was unaccountably happy.

"What's new, Martin, eh?"

"Would you like to go to a meeting tonight? I'm picking up Ralph, and Abbie is going along."

Evelyn hesitated.

"I'll have to ask my husband," she said doubtfully.

"You will?" Martin asked.

"No, I won't either. Pick me up."

"That's the girl," he said.

What will I do now? she thought after hanging up. Robert is bound to object. He won't let me go. I'll go anyway. The problem became one of defiance of her husband's will. The question of the meeting in relation to her drinking was obscured. To face him. And yet she did not want to face him. She wanted to receive him. If he believes I can really stop drinking. I do want to stay stopped. All those shakes and the horrible guilt and the longing. And that blackout. What happened? I don't ever ever want to drink again.

She finished the vacuuming and then dusted the living-room. It was lunch time. She opened a can of mushroom soup. While it was heating she remembered Mary's call and brought the AA book to the kitchen. She started to read it while she ate. The language and ideas were easy to understand. What struck her immediately was the realization that an enormous number of people in all circumstances had fallen victim to alcoholism. It made her own experience less terrifying. She carried the book to the living-room and was still reading when Bobby and Elaine came in from school. Hastily she thrust the book under a sofa pillow. It would be difficult, going to meetings, reading about alcohol, without the children suspecting that something secret and shameful was going on. But they've seen me drunk often enough. How will I explain it to them?

But the children were happy and excited without any apparent cause. They kissed her affectionately and bumped against her and she found Bobby's head against her breast. Was it because they realized she was doing something about her weakness? She pressed Bobby's head tightly against her and wrestled a little with both of them, laughing.

"What's all the excitement for?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing," Elaine said. "We're just glad to be home from school."

Robert was preoccupied when he entered at five forty-five. Generally he finished reading the evening paper on the train but this evening she saw that the paper had not been opened. Such a break in his habits was really startling. He said hello and peered briefly at her. To see if I've been drinking, she thought. How many times she had avoided his eyes on some pretext, or had tried to stare



brightly and soberly back at him. Neither method had been successful. He had always known. Now her eyes were clear and calm though inwardly she was tremulous. It would be a crisis, she knew, asserting herself, disregarding his will.

At dinner she and Robert sat at the ends of the table, the children at either side. The dinner set was dark green. The table was dark mahogany. She used place mats. At Robert's insistence they always sat down with a sense of formality, everyone pulling out his chair at the same moment. They did not say grace.

Evelyn, as she made small quick attacks on her food, kept glancing at the others' plates, ready to serve more. She moved Elaine's glass of milk to a safer point, rose once to shut off the percolator in the kitchen. The children talked of school. Robert remained absorbed in unexpressed thought. When she served the dessert he looked at her for a long moment. There was something pleading in his eyes, a vague need for some kind of reassurance. Her resolution faltered. She had an impulse to rise on some pretext and kiss his head from behind. It had been a long time since she had done anything like that. Her breath had always been laden.

"Did anyone call today?" Robert asked finally.

"Mrs. Dennison. I told her I wasn't collecting for Red Cross this year."

"Why? You shouldn't neglect a thing like that."

"I'm not neglecting it. I'm just not going to collect anything this year."

Robert lowered his eyes from her challenging stare.

"But who is Mrs. Dennison going to get? You know her husband is a selectman."

"What has that to do with it?"

"Oh, don't be intentionally slow in understanding. In a town like this, things like tax adjustments and improvement costs are continually coming up and it's good to be friendly with someone who can help."

"Well, her husband is not so select and I don't know or care who she's going to get."

"That's a strange attitude and an ambiguous statement," Robert said.

She was trembling now, not her hands but that awful internal trembling that alternated with a rigid, unbreathing tension. She felt the need to wound him in retaliation.

"The collections are in the evening and you're home if you're worried about it," she said. She felt a moment's amazement at her

temerity. "As for being ambiguous, you'd know what Mr. Dennison's look meant if you were a woman."

Both the children and Robert stared at her and she felt defenceless and then deeply resentful. As if I am an object.

"I'm going out tonight," she said.

"Out?" It was more of an exclamation. "Where?" Robert asked.

"To a meeting."

"We'll talk about it later," he said.

She could see that for once he was bewildered.

Bobby and Elaine went out to play and she washed the dinner dishes rapidly. She dried her hands on a paper towel and left the dishes to drain. She felt propelled towards a crisis she dreaded. In the past she would have avoided it but now a feeling for revenge lent an element of anticipation to her excitement. She entered the living-room. It wasn't until she was seated that Robert lowered his paper and stared silently at her for a long moment. It's his office technique, she thought. But she wasn't an office girl. She could light a cigarette and avoid his eyes and ruin the effect of his opening.

"How did you decide to go to a meeting tonight?" Robert asked.

"Oh, a friend I met at the hospital, Martin, called. He's picking up a couple of other people and I promised to go along."

"Martin," he remarked dryly.

"Why do you say it that way?"

"Don't any of the drunks have last names?"

She flushed painfully. She had an impulse to say, Oh, forget it, I won't go. On the edge of her consciousness an excuse for resumed drinking presented itself; he had refused to co-operate, had prevented her attending meetings. But she was spurred on, not by her desire to stay sober but to conquer.

"What difference does it make? It's just a habit, to protect anonymity, I suppose. His name is Gray."

"Martin Gray. What does he mean to you?"

She was amazed. The question was a sudden crack in a stone surface. Robert would never have allowed himself such a query in the past. What was happening to him? The question pleased rather than offended her, but she retained her pose of injury and increased her antagonism.

"Mean? He's just a friend. No, he's more than a friend. He's a man with some kind of vision."

"A vision you get from drinking too much, probably," Robert said. "I don't think you'd better go to that meeting tonight."

"But you agreed that I should go to some meetings," she protested.

"This anonymity is really impractical," Robert said. "I've been thinking it over. Sooner or later your going will be discovered. Lord knows what will result from that. This talk of alcoholism being simply a disease is fine for the alcoholic but who else will consider it that? To everybody else it's just a moral disgrace. Or maybe a social disease, like syphilis."

"Oh, stop it!" she cried.

Robert glanced swiftly at her, alarmed at her outburst.

"If I were you I wouldn't look at it as a social disease," she said more quietly. "I don't think you'd like the implication, that you may have given it to me."

"Now I'm to blame, I suppose."

"I don't blame anyone."

He lit a cigarette. The few moments' silence discharged the atmosphere.

"Well, anyway," Robert said, "I'm still sceptical about the whole thing. I think you can handle it alone."

"I've tried and tried alone," she said. "You don't know how I've struggled against it. All you know is the failure, not the attempt. I don't want to do it alone any longer. I need someone to talk to."

"There's no use getting excited about it," he remarked.

"Why isn't there? Why not get excited? You loathed and condemned me for drinking too much and now I want to stop you must prescribe the method. Which is not to do anything, just let it evaporate, because you're scared for your precious little self and your cosy routine. This integrity of yours is nothing more than a wall to shut out the disagreeable world and you're afraid of all the Mr. Dennisons."

She realized now that she had exposed him cruelly. She waited almost joyfully for his anger to pierce her. But his face remained impassive.

"You seem to have become quite fluent from your hospitalization," he said.

"It's because I heard other things besides costs and insurance for a change. When we were first married we used to wonder about things but now we're sunk in a morass of bright colours and waxed surfaces and suffocating comfort that demands complete anxiety to keep it going. We can't ask or risk a real question. Our answers are always correct because our vision is so limited. It's terrible, terrible!"

"You're getting hysterical," Robert said. "And we were talking about the meeting."

"I'm going to the meeting," she said, rising. "I have to change now."

"Supposing I forbid it?"

She stopped on her way from the room and faced him.

"I wouldn't if I were you, Robert. I wouldn't."

For the first time in years she looked at him with her face set, her glance penetrating and unwavering. Robert rose to break the challenge. He shrugged.

"Is this Martin 'way calling at the door or does he just blow the horn for you?"

"I'm sure he'll ring the bell."

"Good. I want to meet him."

## 2

But when she was in her room she could not imagine Robert and Martin together. How can they even talk to each other? Maybe she could stand by the door and leave when the car stopped. But Robert would be suspicious. She worried about what to wear, not knowing anything about the meetings. She did not want to appear ostentatious nor did she want to be deliberately shabby. A dark suit would go well with her light hair and would not be flashy. She heard Bobby and Elaine go into the kitchen, where they did their schoolwork in the breakfast nook. When she entered the living-room she found Robert standing by the windows.

"There's a car driving up," he said and returned to his chair. She went to the door and opened it as Martin came up the walk. She had never seen him dressed. His bearing was hardly different than it had been in a bathrobe. He was dressed in a light grey suit and wore a solid maroon tie with a starched white shirt. He looked like a doctor or a professor. One would never have supposed him to be an alcoholic. His self-assurance and control were immediately felt. He smiled at her with that intent narrowing of his eyes. Robert stood up with obvious reluctance.

"This is Mr. Johnson," she said.

"How are you, Mr. Johnson?" said Martin. "Can I steal your wife for the evening?"

"She seems determined to go to that meeting." Robert's disapproval was apparent.

They were all standing. Evelyn was acutely uncomfortable. Martin was peering at Robert with his familiarly quizzical expression. She could see that Robert was affronted. He changed his stance irritably.

"I have to get a coat," she said and hurried to her room where she stood in the doorway, listening. The words sounded distant and hollow, with no personal contact, like a telephone conversation.

"Are you an alcoholic?" Robert asked brusquely.

"Oh, yes," Martin said. She knew he would be smiling as though he were rather happy about it. "I was at the hospital with Evelyn. What a fine woman. And beautiful. She helped us all just by being there."

"I'm sure," Robert remarked.

He would be disturbed and slightly insulted in appearance, determined not to enter into any slightest intimacy with this man. He would dislike it that Martin should be at his ease.

"You don't seem to be upset about having been at the hospital," he said.

"Why no," Martin answered. "To tell the truth I rather enjoyed it after a couple of days. It was an experience."

"An experience," Robert echoed.

"That's all. An experience that is now past."

She had already laid her coat on her bed and now she caught it up and returned to the living-room.

"The children are doing their schoolwork in the kitchen," she said. Martin shook hands with Robert again.

"I'll bring her home early." He cocked his head ruefully. "That sounds like when I was taking Mrs. Smith's daughter out."

Evelyn was surprised to see Robert smiling.

"If I was younger I'd cash in my war bonds and wander away with her," Martin continued, looking at her.

"A couple of weeks ago I would have given you some of mine," Robert said.

But now? Evelyn was unfolding. A sudden gaiety moved her across the room to kiss Robert good-bye. He offered his mouth briefly and she could hardly restrain herself from clasping him.

On the walk outside she put a restraining hand on Martin's arm.

"Well, did he surprise you?"

"No, Evelyn. Why?"

"It seemed so unnatural that you two should meet."

"Yes."

"And what do you think?"

"There is no doubt that he is lonely."

"Lonely?" she exclaimed, stopping on the walk.

"Of course. And maybe frightened a little too. Of consequences he cannot envisage. Your drinking, you know, has caused him to cast doubt on the validity of the framework on which he supports the body of his belief. At least, Evelyn, with all its misery, you had the evasion of booze. What does he have in his moments of terrible questioning?"

"The respect of people? Pride?"

"Not very warm company. Love would be better."

"But," she started to protest.

"I know. Booze has erected the barrier and with his shyness it's almost impossible to pierce. One of the most difficult things for the sober alcoholic to realize is that the uncertainties that tortured him also exist in the non-alcoholic mate. It is even possible that Robert has been more injured by booze than you. On the other hand, if you stay sober it may be the cause of a love greater than you've known before. If you listen closely to the speakers at the meetings you'll learn many things, Evelyn. They may not analyse their stories but all the elements are there for your growth and your understanding, pointers that go far beyond the simple booze tales, things that will make your sobriety happy. It's altogether different than going on the wagon."

They continued to the car. Ralph and Abbie were sitting in the rear seat. It was strange, saying hello to Ralph, a little like meeting a boy at school a year after you had a crush on him. I hope I didn't hurt him, she thought. The hospital already seemed long ago. It was too dark to see his face or Abbie's. That strange, strange week at the hospital, that big dividing line.

### 3

It was eleven o'clock when Martin brought her back. There was one light burning in the living-room. Robert's door was shut. She did not know what to think of the meeting. As she began to undress, she kept remembering faces, some of them indelibly marked with past excesses, the pouchy eyes and the poor complexion and the high colour, and then a face here and there that was pale, clear, studiously concentrated. But everyone had laughed and talked enthusiastically at the end of the regular meeting. The meeting had left her feeling deflated, something of a humble, calm sorrow filling

her, something, too, of fear and loneliness. She had not felt close to any of the women who talked to her and she had not offered any comments on her own difficulty. But she would go again, if only because she had so much respect for Martin's judgment.

Evelyn took off her dress and was sitting in her slip at her dresser when Robert entered in his pyjamas. She could not keep the surprise from her face. He walked to a position slightly behind her.

"How was the meeting?" he asked.

"All right," she answered.

"How do you feel? Are you tired?" he asked with a gentleness strange to him.

She glanced at him in the mirror with an expectant but somehow stricken look.

"No, not tired. Maybe a little discouraged."

She reached up behind her back to unfasten her brassiere.

"Don't be," he said, unfastening it for her.

She worked the straps past the straps of her slip and over her arms and slipped the brassiere aside. Robert put his hands on her shoulder and she sat motionless, her hands in her lap and her head bowed slightly.

He wants me, she thought.

"I'd forgotten how beautiful you are," Robert said.

"Oh," she said disparagingly. How strange he sounds!

"It hasn't been easy, Evelyn. Sometimes I haven't said what I wanted to say. Sometimes I've said exactly the opposite."

"Yes."

"I was sad and then perhaps angry that I was sad."

"I understand. I am sorry."

She felt him moving the straps of her slip off her shoulders. She glanced into the mirror and saw him with his head bowed above her, almost with an air of defeat. It can't be that his desire has overcome his pride, she thought. That mustn't happen. I won't let it happen. They shouldn't be in conflict.

Her tenderness swelled within her, turgid, lubricous, and she trembled with painful desire. Oh, why must love be a contest? she cried within herself. She put his hands on her breasts and leaned her head back with her face up. Robert bent to kiss her and for an instant she saw his perplexed and begging eyes.

"I was waiting for you," he said. "It seemed like a long time."

"A long time," she echoed, leaning her head against his stomach with her eyes shut.

She led him gently to his embraces. There was a kind of despair

in his abandon, as though it were an act of contrition, and when she kissed his eyes in the darkness she found them wet. She did not speak. What can one say of silent tears in the darkness? Even a whisper is too loud. That a man should weep, she thought. What have I done to him that he was never able to speak?

Evelyn remembered a line read somewhere, "And all our nameless childhood fears returned and clung to us like rain-drenched cloaks." A searing pity tore her and she petted his head, and she knew that in this modern world a wife must be also a mother to her mate and that those who seek only the assuagement of desire will be denied even that release. But what of the day? Will the sun fall first on the motionless board of unsolved conflict? Why is it that the night brings vision and the day blindness? But her loneliness now was not bitter, not final. It overflowed into a fostering love and a deep tenderness for the man whose nose and lips were half-pressed in sleep against her breast. What illusions can flower from disenchantment and with what little effort they can be made real.

## XX

### 1

MARTIN noticed Abbie standing alone and came to her with Evelyn and Ralph. Quite a number of men came up to Martin and shook hands with him, saying they were glad to see him again. It was obvious that some of them did not know of his stay at the hospital, but then something in Martin's manner made them glance at him a second time so that they became aware that he had had trouble. It was like an unspoken confession. The men, on leaving, pressed his arm and said, Stick with it.

How did they know? she wondered. There were no traces on Martin's face. His manner struck her as a little abject and she felt a small anger. You're better than any of them, she thought, offering him defence. She noticed here and there others who, when speaking, had that narrow, intent, direct stare that Martin had developed, as though they had gained some greater power of concentration and perception. Yet their speech was common enough, indeed often crude and vulgar. What was it that they had found?

Evelyn was looking about nervously. To Abbie, she always seemed



so innocent and vulnerable. Certainly she appeared a little out of place. There was no one in the room who looked so undamaged nor so well dressed. Nor so beautiful, with her lovely hair and her broad forehead, the high cheek bones, the pale flat cheeks. Abbie put her arm briefly about Evelyn's waist.

"Take it easy," she whispered.

Evelyn smiled quickly. "I'm all right, Abbie. It's just something at home."

"But don't worry about it. I bet nobody here thinks you're an alcoholic."

"A lot of people here don't look as if they've had trouble. Abbie, can I say something to you? I know you're broke and Martin is helping you. I haven't any money because my husband shut me off. But I've got too many clothes and we're about the same size if you wanted anything."

It was then that Abbie remembered vividly the letters she had written after that first AA meeting. She had not known, had not been able to sense because of her condition, the goodness of the people she had met. She had not known that a man like Martin would go to meetings or that a woman like Evelyn might have trouble. The memory of the letters caused her a deep and terrible embarrassment. She felt as if everyone in the room must be aware of the depth of her betrayal. What is the matter with me? she wondered. These were strange new feelings. Worst of all it was Martin and Evelyn she had traduced even before she had known them. She felt half-sick and made a wry and bitter face. Evelyn mistook her look.

"Oh," she said. "I didn't mean to----"

"No, it's something else."

"But don't worry about it," Evelyn said, laughing. "Will you come to see me, Abbie? I'm alone all day and we can have a nice talk together. I'll write down my address."

The meeting was in the social room of an Episcopal church. There was a stage at one end but some sense of fitness caused the chairman's table to be placed on the floor level where the speakers and the listeners would be more closely identified. Abbie did not know what to do with the moment's silence opening the meeting. She compromised on a half-bow of her head and stared at her nails which she had finally polished. She did not know if Martin, who was sitting beside her, had either bowed his head or shut his eyes.

She listened when the first speaker, a woman who was married and had small children, began to speak. Evelyn has small children, she thought.

But the woman's experiences were quite different from Abbie's. She had been a home drinker and carried the guilt of neglect. Her husband had been patient. She mentioned that he was at the meeting. What had made her drink? She didn't know. She didn't care, really. Now she was sober. She was trying to rectify the damage she might have caused her children. You did not realize until after you were sober a while just what misery you had caused others. But I didn't get sober for my children or my husband. I tried that and I failed time and time again. I got sober for myself because I was filled with self-disgust. I wanted to get sober and stay sober. By the grace of God I found AA.

The second speaker was a man who had a background of county jails and two commitments, who had drunk everything, rubbing alcohol, hair tonic, canned heat, cheap wine. Sneaky Pete, he called the wine. For years he had played the carnival racket because he was always sure of a drink. Again Abbie paid little attention. "I had a wheel I was running," the speaker said. "Some people used to think it was fixed. What fixed? I'm giving away Spanish shawls I buy for eighty cents wholesale out of Brooklyn. There's eighteen numbers at ten cents each on the board. What do you have to be crooked for? I might have owned a little show of my own one day but then the booze got me. I never knew when. I could take care of it and then I couldn't any more. I was trapped."

Abbie heard the word *trapped* with a violent sense of recognition. So was I, she murmured to herself. Why? Why? Why me?

"But after a lot of beating I got sprung loose," the speaker said. "By AA. I began here to see what the trap was. I used to wonder why out of all the guys I drank with I had to be the lush. It's no good. Forget why, if you try to figure why all the time, you'll get drunk again. They say it's a disease. That's good enough for me. I'll go along with that."

A disease, Abbie thought. As simple as that? She had never been sick in her life except from booze and not eating. If it was a disease, you could look at it differently. A nice respectable disease, she thought sardonically. But maybe it was so. I've drunk often when I didn't want to, when I was compelled to.

She found herself listening to the third speaker, a woman of middle age who had been a chorus girl and a strip-teaser. She knew instantly that this speaker had gone the rounds like herself, looking for the wild nights. Despite her terrible experiences the speaker had retained or recovered a bouncing exuberance, and she carried the tatters of her former beauty proudly, like a war-torn banner.

"Well, I'm an alcoholic," she said. "I don't know which of my names to use, but since coming to AA three years ago I've been calling myself Georgia because that's where I had my first drink. Corn liquor, sir. Now."

"Well," the speaker said, "they say this is an honest programme so—A hospital I was once in, there was this psychiatrist. He asked why did I start to drink. 'Why, to have a good time,' I said. But this was too simple for him. He wanted to dig something out of me. But there was nothing there. Absolutely nothing, you know. Tough luck, old boy, I thought. But they kept me there and I began to get worried. I was a borderline case. I wasn't crazy enough to be sane or sane enough to be crazy. I thought up some juicy obsessions and I was going to try them out but then I was discharged. Somebody discovered I was getting free board, I guess.

"Well, I started out in the chorus, kicking, and I started to drink right away. Matinees I was pretty good but evenings I was always half-loaded and once in a while my belly was where my behind should have been. I just couldn't remember the routine at times. So they shoved me in the rear row and then out the rear door. There's no money in that anyway, I thought. Well, God graced me with flesh and a set of good teeth so I went modelling for foundations. In those days you had to smile in a corset. Also you had to be available for the company of out-of-town buyers. There was this elderly gentleman who was a little crazy about me. 'Why do you drink so much?' he asked. 'Always I smell whisky on your breath.' 'If you didn't I wouldn't be with you,' I answered. With this insult I left him where he was and I got bounced because this fellow used to really buy corsets. So then I went strip teasing.

"Well, you know that didn't make me drink any less. The stages were draughty and beads are cold. I always had a few before coming on. Besides, the whole audience was generally half-gassed so why shouldn't I be? Three hundred a week I got for a few minutes of silly shaking and there was always somebody waiting to take me out. Baltimore, Newark, Boston, Albany, Buffalo, Montreal. What a routine. Twice I fell in love and twice booze ruined it. The second time it was put bluntly to me. 'It's me or booze,' he said. 'They don't line up as a choice,' I said. 'With me they do,' he answered. I had a glass in my hand. 'Close the door softly on your way out,' I said.

"My shape stayed good and for a few more years I could cover my face with make-up and get away with it. Nothing happened to my talent. I just never had any. What's a few bumps and grinds,

a flash of teeth, a little wiggle? The word got around and then I played the carnivals in girlie shows. Gin and gooseflesh. In the winter I hit dives that would make the Old Howard seem like a cathedral. I got picked up by the boys in blue and landed in the psycho ward.

"It was then I finally admitted to myself I was an alcoholic. But I thought, I'll do this thing alone. I just won't drink. I was shipped up on the hill. Why are all asylums on hills? After sixty days I was released.

"Then it was from the hotel to the flop house, from Canadian Club to port wine. You get sicker and sicker. I was corralled again and sent up for another sixty days. I used to look in the mirror and wonder who I was looking at. What had happened, what had happened? I was young, gay, good-looking, and now I was staring at a cheap beaten-up slut. What hit me? The second time in the cracker factory I went to a few AA meetings. I went for it like I had gone for the bottle. To hell with memories, to hell with regret for the good times gone, the face I once had, the men I knew. I am what I am, I thought. Either I salvage what I can or I die. It was that simple. Well, I haven't had a drink since. That's five years ago. Not by myself, now. I tried it by myself and got drunk again. With AA, with other alcoholics, I learned simple things that struck me like revelations. Things like, You don't have to drink to live. Taking it one day at a time. If you're happy there's no need to drink. If you're helping someone else and they depend on you, it makes you strong and you get the best part of the bargain. I always took. I figured I got more taking. It was only after I came to AA that I learned that I could get so much more giving.

"I learned to recognize a power greater than myself. That is, I learned how small I am. I don't know much about God. To tell you the truth the word embarrasses me, but since getting sober I've become real to myself and to others. With alcohol I had no choice. My whole life was controlled and pushed around by it. Now I have the power of decision. If I decide wrong, it's myself who made the choice, not alcohol making it for me.

"If I can stay sober and be happy about it, anyone can. Thank you. It's been nice to speak to an audience in words instead of wiggles."

In the pool of faces, the fat-jowled and lean, the pale skins and the violently red skins, the purple and yellow tinged, the calm and the distraught, Abbie's was one, perhaps the only one, so frozen in absorption. She had heard the words and had seen the figures

moving behind them. She knew as well the unspoken story, the sweaty love and the weary night, the satiation and the condemned dawn, all the chimeric areas of experience which she had felt was the only true life. It was Abbie herself the speaker had laid bare, her own senseless plunging towards an unheroic destruction. But more than this she had heard the sound of laughter and the promise that she could still have the unusual without the sacrifice of sanity. Like David and Helen she wanted some private corner of life that was untrammelled by the hooves of normality. And this could be it, this way of staying sober that was not defeat but an avenue of new excitement and a new dimension of revolt. A feeling near to pride seized her and she had, also, the sense of belonging and of wanting to be a part of this as she had once wanted to be in the centre of a small group of hell-raisers.

As the speaker left the front of the room, Abbie turned to Martin. He smiled gently at her.

"Like it?" he asked softly.

"Wasn't she something now?" Abbie responded. "The others didn't mean so much to me."

People gathered about in small groups, drinking coffee and eating doughnuts or sandwiches. Martin introduced a number of people. Ralph got talking to a salesman on the problem of hiding your breath on a sales call. Two women, housewives, talked to Abbie and Evelyn about hiding places for bottles. Most women had been bottle hiders. Abbie hadn't, except during her second marriage. She edged away, noticing the last speaker, Georgia, standing alone. She approached her timidly and said, "I'm Abbie."

"Hi, Abbie."

"What you had to say was close to me."

"Well, I always wonder, speaking, if anyone gets anything from me. After all, how many alcoholics have been strip-teasers? We're all a little alike, but a salesman now, he had to use different tricks. And a lawyer or a dentist. Anyway, I feel good after speaking even if nobody else does. It helps me. You're not too old yet. I didn't get wised up till I was over forty. You, you can snap back good. How old are you?"

"Thirty-three."

"You'll be looking like a beauty in three months."

"How do you know I haven't been sober three months?"

"Well, the way you look and act. You sense it somehow. Nice looking man you're with."

"His name is Martin."

"I know. I've seen him around. Still reaching. Are you going with him?"

"No. I have some trouble. He's helping me out."

"Well, sober you can take care of them." Georgia looked at her intently a moment. "I had trouble occasionally besides booze. At least I thought I did but when you look closer it's connected."

Abbie almost recoiled. She knew she had no secret to guard now. She was offended, then relieved. Of course. They stood on the same ground. They had both known the dark avenues.

## 2

Abbie was still living at Martin's house. During the day, when Martin was at work, she could not bring herself to touch things in the house. She walked about as if trying to keep herself in a vacuum. She had the hollow feeling of not belonging. It was a house as it would be following a death. The ghost of Martin's wife hovered over everything. She had never before been disturbed about appropriating things; now she could not. Martin's unattainableness seemed to apply to his possessions. The pint was still in the medicine cabinet. It was the only thing in the whole house that belonged to her. Once or twice she had lifted it out and looked at it as one might at a souvenir that had deep sentimental associations.

She cooked breakfast and in the evening Martin took her out to eat. At lunch she ate something that did not need cooking in order not to handle the utensils that his wife had used. She took her vitamin capsules regularly and sometimes she bathed three times a day. She began to worry that Martin's wife might come back for some things, an electric mixer or something like that, while she was there. She planned to hide in the cellar if this happened. She was not in any possible way to blame for Martin's relations with his wife, yet she felt culpable. She knew he had a good wife though he had never mentioned much about her. It was just that a woman couldn't be other than good with him, she thought. just that you couldn't hurt him. And so she knew that his wife must have suffered intensely, not having the outlet of anger or vindictiveness as a counterpoison.

When they reached the house that night, after leaving Evelyn and Ralph off, they sat in the living-room having more coffee. Martin was always drinking coffee, maybe as a substitute for the booze. He read till late at night. If she couldn't sleep and looked out into the hall, a thin light showed from his barely opened door.

"How did you like the meeting, Abbie?" he asked her

"I liked it fine. The people seem so good."

"The goodness you see in them is the goodness in yourself seeing," he said. "The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me."

"You're always giving me sayings."

It was when she was in bed that impressions of the meeting came flooding back, clothing the immediate sharp reaction with smaller details, the dress some woman had worn, the set of a face, a stray sentence, strangeness and familiarity commingling as in remembered adolescence. The meeting receded sharply in time but remained clearly in focus. Then the ideas of the meeting began to assume a certain pattern into which she was fitted inexorably. She knew she had belonged at the meeting. It was not like attending a lecture at which one had to make an effort to identify oneself with the lecturer and his subject. The identity had been established long ago. Everything she had heard bore directly down on her. There was nothing she had heard that she doubted. Her life had become unmanageable through drinking, as the first step said. She recalled her feeling that she could attain the unusual without the sacrifice of her sanity. That was something like the second step: We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Abbie's realization of these two thoughts came as something of a revelation. She opened her eyes in the darkness, exhilarated. She felt she had made a tremendous discovery.

Her mood of elation carried over into the next day and as soon as Martin left she took the big book of *Alcoholics Anonymous* from his shelf and began reading it. At noon she could read no longer because thoughts were swarming unbearably into her mind. She lay down for an hour and then she thought: I must go back and face my room. I must sleep there alone and wake up and look at it. I must walk the streets alone and go by the places I drank in and past the liquor store and down to the beach.

It was a small odyssey into her past she planned, sailing by the dangers and enticements. She felt strong. Even if I shake I'll be strong, she thought, I've got everything to help me. I'll leave a note for Martin so he won't worry. I'll say I promise to telephone him before I take a drink if I'm tempted. Telephone therapy, they called it. Don't drink, call first. And it's only twenty-four hours. I won't take any secondal, either.

She was not nervous on the bus, but when she reached Lynn and

began walking towards her room; a certain weakness in her legs caused her to walk close to the store fronts so that she could rest against a window if necessary. She had stopped a moment when someone touched her arm. It was Bill Gegan, who lived on some kind of a pension and who had always been good for a drink. For an instant she thought she was going to be sick.

"Well!" he said. "I haven't seen you around. How about a couple with me? I'm lonesome."

"No," she said. "No," she repeated. "I'm not drinking."

"Don't give me that, Abbie."

She looked into his flushed face and at his lips that were peculiarly bloodless and undefined in all that round swollen redness. There was a corner of matter in one of his eyes. Incongruously, he was dressed immaculately. He wore a large gold ring with a big diamond in it. She began crying piteously within herself.

"I'm moving away," she said. "I'm making a break."

"I'll give you a break," he said with a short, hoarse laugh at his cleverness. "I'll pick up a fifth and some beer and we'll take a cabin out on the pike for the day. What do you say? You know, a little affection, a few drinks, hey?"

"No. I have some things to do. I'm not drinking, anyway."

That she should have to stand there explaining was an outrage she could hardly bear. The words and the proximity of the man defiled her, though she had already spent a night with him on one of her benders.

"Oh, come on. You'll like it," he said. "It's not like we haven't already gotten acquainted."

He put one hand on her ribs, his thumb touching the base of her breast.

"God, take your hands off me!" she cried in a horror she could not endure.

She jerked away and went down the street walking as swiftly as she could. That he should have touched her body—— He could have slapped her face. Her face was nothing and could bear pain. Her face was still ravaged. But her body was white and pale and clean. Violated. The word came to her mind. Me! she thought. What right have I?

As she entered the rooming house, Mrs. Sweetser, the landlady, met her.

"Where have you been, Abbie?" she asked in her weary, squeaking voice. She was dressed in her usual bungalow apron on which there were food spots and a coffee stain. "Away, eh? Just away, eh?"



"Oh, I was just on a vacation," Abbie said,

"Was it good, Abbie?" Mrs. Sweetser asked with a happy, lascivious look. "Was it a good vacation, eh?"

"Oh, all right."

In her room Abbie threw herself on the bed and wept bitterly. Then suddenly she sat up and stared fixedly at the floor with the tears still wet on her face. I'll get a pint. I'll lie here and a few drinks will wash it away and I'll sleep. She looked in her purse. She had four dollars. A pint, two thirty-five. I'll wait a while. She lay back again. And if I do, I deserve the hands on me and the slimy voice. Already, in one hour, my great new discovery is gone. I'm not shaky, really. I don't need the drink. If I take the drink it's just because it's me that wants it more than I want this other thing. If I take the drink, I'm gone.

Abbie fell asleep finally. When she woke in the evening she sat up with a faint smile. I didn't have the drink. I'm all right now. I'm hungry, too. I'll go eat somewhere.

## XXI

THE amount of knowledge grows, the intelligence lessens. As so many have already remarked, he amended. Martin was on his way to the office of the colonel who was the head of the division. It is the relationships which are missing, the links, he thought. The colonel wanted to question the efficiency ratings Martin had given to his men. A man who was married and had three children had needed a rating of very good in order to qualify for a jump up in grading and a pay raise, so Martin had rated him very good. The fact that the inspector was only good had not weighed too heavily in his judgment. It was the children he saw. But he had gotten caught in a comparison of the other inspectors who were all more qualified and better workers and he had in despair rated all his men very good. What could you do? he thought. But this colonel was a new man who had been transferred from a port of embarkation. He had come in while Martin was at Greenleaf Hill.

Martin knew not only all the inspection methods, but his knowledge of army regulations in connection with purchasing, inspection,

acceptance, and shipment was complete and exact. He was expert at government correspondence and could dictate smoothly by the hour. He had even invented some pet phrases of his own that had been widely copied. My section runs very smoothly, he thought, and if I want to shove a little of my own efficiency on this poor inspector, what difference does it make?

His strength and confidence at work came from twenty years in government service, fifteen spent in supervision. He was aware that his special knowledge and ability exceeded those of any superior for whom he had ever worked or was ever likely to work.

But he carried this knowledge negligently, almost contemptuously, for it seemed of little value to him as a man. Had his attitude been different had he had a clawing ambition, he could have gone into private industry and commanded a large salary.

The colonel's door was open and he walked in. He elevated his eyebrows on finding the colonel in uniform. Must be some luncheon he has to attend, he thought. The colonel stood and smiled. He was trim, and even in the usually awkward movement of rising from a swivel chair behind a desk, he achieved a certain grace of movement at which Martin marvelled. What struck him most forcibly was the beautiful bald head of the colonel. It had no disfiguring indentions or small planes to mar its symmetry. It exactly suited the colonel's face, which was lean and tanned. Health, vigour, eagerness. And what lay underneath? Martin wondered. He had rather expected a flushed face and a paunch, perhaps glasses. The colonel put out his hand.

"I've been wanting to meet you," he said. "Sit down. You know I come from a port of embarkation. I've handled tons and tons of stuff from this district and always without trouble. I'm glad to be assigned here. You've got one of the highest ratings in the country, you know."

"Yes," Martin said, with a note of pleasant, casual agreement. As a civilian he had never been able to use the word *sir* to an officer. He sat down, crossed his legs, and reached in his side coat-pocket for a cigarette.

"Now," the colonel said, "I want to go into this matter of efficiency ratings, but first let me say I'm sorry you were ill when I arrived. How are you feeling now?"

"All right," Martin replied.

"Nothing serious, then? Gastritis, wasn't it?"

"No," he said slowly, "no, it wasn't gastritis. I was in a drying-out hospital on account of booze."

The colonel didn't change his expression but he let a long moment go by before he said anything.

"You don't look as though you've had any trouble that way," he said finally.

"Well, I was dry for six months," Martin said. "Then I started on this bender and I was on it for four days. I thought I better get off it quickly as possible, so I went into this hospital."

"Why did you tell me?" the colonel asked. "It wasn't necessary."

"Maybe it was necessary to me," Martin said.

"Have you ever tried this AA thing?" the colonel asked.

Martin smiled.

"Oh, yes. I've been going for more than a year. That's how I stayed dry so long. This last is what is called a slip."

"I've got this brother of mine, younger than me," the colonel said. "I tried to talk him into going. Jesus! What a mess. He thinks he can handle it alone. It breaks your heart."

"I know," Martin said. "Well, he'll do something when he gets hurt bad enough."

"What is bad enough?" the colonel asked.

"It varies," Martin said. "But you're right. He'll never do it alone. You have to accept help."

The colonel moved himself closer to the desk.

"Listen," he said. "I know nothing about your drinking, you understand? This conversation didn't take place. As far as I'm concerned you were simply on sick leave. You understand? There's a general tightening-up going around and a lot of divisions have been hurt by the separation of men who are well-trained and excellent performers for reasons not connected at all with the quality of their work. I know nothing of all you've said. I don't want anything happening to the working of my division."

"Fine," Martin said.

"Now this matter of ratings. Do you actually consider that all your men rate 'very good'?"

Martin grinned suddenly.

"Well, no, Colonel," he said. "Honest to Christ, I don't. But I got involved in sympathies, and virtue sometimes springs a sharper trap than vice."

"Well?" the colonel said.

"I have this man who really deserves only 'good,' but he has three kids and is saddled with a heavy mortgage and he needed a better rating in order to get a boost in pay. The other inspectors are all more qualified than he is, so there I was, right

up against a problem, in ethics that must be as old as the first campfire."

"So you overlook regulations so that you can sleep easier at night?"

"That's a base interpretation of a noble impulse, Colonel," Martin said.

The colonel was smiling again.

"Okay," he said. "I'll let it ride."

"You mean you're going to let the ratings stand?"

"Sure," the colonel said. "But not for your reasons. I don't give a damn about this instructor's home difficulties. You are my key man. The matter is too picayunish to get you upset over it. That's all. I'm not operating on a company level. Now, I want to go into these contracts for high-fidelity dummies with you. First, I want to see the specifications so that I can get a picture of what the manufacturers are up against."

"I'll call down and have them sent up," Martin said, reaching for the phone.

Martin was surprised that noon came so quickly. Often he sat idly at his desk for several hours because he had accomplished four hours' work in two. He was rather disappointed when the colonel said he would be gone for the afternoon.

"Your section is your own, Gray," the colonel said as Martin stood in the doorway. "If the men under you get in a jam, it's you who are in the jam as far as I'm concerned."

"Good enough," Martin said.

He had lunch alone. Since attending AA meetings he had changed his luncheon place. He had eaten formerly at Mario's, where he could have some wine or beer with his meal, or if he had been too shaky, three or four shots and a bowl of soup. He had stopped going to Mario's not because of the fear of taking a drink but because the warm, dark atmosphere brought back a lingering need for escape and aroused thoughts ill-fitted to noontime. Now he lunched in a bright, bustling cafeteria full of voices and clattering dishes, and with a book created a small island of silence about himself.

The afternoon went slowly and if it had not been for his being away a week he would have gotten a car from the pool and gone out to a factory on some pretext.

It had turned raw and cold by five o'clock. He walked over Charles Street and along to the North Station instead of taking the subway. The wind was whipping along the Charles River, finding

an unobstructed course. Ralph had once worked on tugboats, he remembered. It must have been an exhilarating experience. He himself had spent twenty years in a government office, sailing the seas of unrealized longings, trying to see the expanse in the contraction. That I have my sanity is an amazing feat of endurance, he thought. But I did move around a lot in those years before I got married. Perhaps those years have lasted well.

When he opened his front door, he called, "Hi, Abbie!" and then stood in the threatening silence. He closed the door softly and walked into the kitchen. A note was on the breakfast table. He looked down and read it without touching it and went back to the living-room where he sat in a chair near the front door much like a stranger. It was the first time he had been alone in the house since his wife's departure. What will I do? he thought, as if faced with some irreconcilable conflict. The house seemed chilled and he rose to turn up the thermostat. Oh, hell, I'll cook some supper. It's only that habit has been amputated. He went upstairs with a small fearfulness, walking softly, to wash his face and hands.

There was little in the refrigerator. He cooked some bacon and eggs and made some toast, and sat eating and reading at the breakfast table. A sharp small sound from the cellar startled him. He listened tensely a moment and continued his supper. What is it I fear now? he wondered. Something was in abeyance. The lingering day outside was dark. He put his dishes in the sink and returned to the living-room, where there were so few signs of occupation. An image of a single lion stood in loneliness on the mantel over the fireplace. Martin sat holding his book and staring the length of the room. The strangeness he faced made him shiver. I have no courage, my heart is hollow, he accused himself. He had an intense longing for the safety and comfort of the years of marriage, the familiar sound, the location of living items, the sequence of small duty.

The room was three-quarters dark now. He could not bring himself to stir and light it. The shadows assumed a menacing sordidity, standing in camouflaged ambush among the chairs and along the wall and in the recesses of doors. He felt the complete absence of aid. The sharp sudden ringing of the phone rigidly immobilized him. It seemed like a signal for attack. He did not move until it had rung a third time, then he walked the length of the room and felt in the darkness for the desk and the phone. His hand was uncertain and he did not speak his name.

Quietly he said, "Hello."

"Martin?" It was his wife's voice.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, how are you?"

"Oh, all right. How are you feeling?"

"Fine." It was always his answer to such a question.

"I had to call about getting a subpoena served, Martin. Are you willing that it should be served?"

"Yes," he said.

"Then I'll let you know when and where. It will save the server and my witness from running around. My witness is just to identify you so that there is no question about your having received the subpoena. I don't know what to use for grounds."

"What it was," he said. "Gross and habitual intoxication."

"You understand I didn't want to do it?"

"Yes," he said. "I understand you had to."

"Will you be all right, Martin?"

"I'll be all right."

"About money and property, there's no need to be disturbed now. I have my own money to live on. Eventually we can sell the house."

"Yes," he said.

"Martin?"

"Yes?"

"It was such a long time."

"A long time," he said.

"You won't feel bitter?"

"If I do, only with myself."

"That we shouldn't hate each other, Martin."

"Neither you nor I can hate," he said.

"It just happened some way."

He could hardly talk now, facing the dark ignorance of the room, trembling, leaning heavily against the desk. He held the quiver from his voice.

"Good night, Martin."

"Good night," he said, putting the receiver back and leaning both hands on the desk, posed like one of the shadows, dependent like them on a darkness cast by the solid fact. In the room the disembodied voice of his wife threaded the shadows together into a blacker fabric. The room, the room. Here in this room where so much had disintegrated. The kindness of his wife and her concern stabbed viciously at him out of the darkness. He brushed through the ambushade to the floor lamp near the divan. The light assembled aid. He sank into the chair he had left. His breath was short and he was trembling.

Almost immediately he rose and without thought went upstairs.

In the bathroom he sloshed some water on his face and dried it. He put his hand to the medicine cabinet and had the pint in his grasp and the cap half unscrewed before he began to think coherently again, to realize why he wanted a drink. It was to conceal the concealment, to hide the hiding place, to double the unreality. I have faced it with Father Tom already, he protested. Why should it come again? A drink will solve nothing. Remember again, this twenty-four hours is the most important twenty-four hours—not yesterday, nor tomorrow, only now, today. It is the one drink, the first drink, that gets you drunk. Have I not earned a rest? The warm unconsciousness and the distant song. To rest for what? Abbie? To start a second murder which will not be so slow? Abbie, her, too? To bring life, and then— --? Supposing she calls for help? I can leave the phone unanswered. Unanswered with all those sharp pealing rings sounding forever in the chambers of my heart, in the hallways of my brain? Unlocked for the weary, shut against the pursued, caught in the cul-de-sac of my words? He refastened the top, replaced the bottle.

He went down into the kitchen and plugged in the coffee percolator and turned on the radio. Oh ho, you bastard, he chided himself to the music. Almost got caught, didn't you? Almost made yourself a tragic actor in a stale melodrama. He carried his coffee to the living-room, into the warm silence and the cordial light. He had almost finished it when the phone rang again. He went to it and said hello.

"It's Abbie." The phone made her voice sound timid and gentle.

"Oh, Abbie," he said.

"I'm all right, Martin. I just thought I would call."

"Where are you calling from?"

"I'm in a drugstore. I went out to eat, Martin."

"Yes?"

"I almost drank and I didn't."

"Will you sleep all right tonight?" he asked. "Did you eat well?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes."

He found himself at a loss for words, as he often did on the phone.

"Martin?"

"Yes?"

"I called really to tell you that I am happy. I'm happy that I didn't drink. I know it won't always be this way but I wanted to tell you."

"Then I'm happy, too, Abbie. Will you come back tomorrow? I'll leave the front door unlocked."

"Should I, Martin?"

"Of course. I wouldn't be alone there too much right now."

"All right."

"It was nice of you to call. Sleep well, Abbie."

"I will. Good night, Martin."

How curiously alike their voices sounded, he mused. Back in his chair his gratitude made him bow his head.

## XXII

THREE weeks had gone by and Ralph and Anne were not speaking to each other yet. It was amazing that two people could live together for so long without talking. He had not taken a drink. Several times he had caught Anne looking at him clinically, as if he were drinking and concealing it successfully from her and she was trying to discover the method of his deception. He had an idea that she would eventually resent his sobriety as an indication of a strength that was independent of her, as she was filled with envy over his going to work each day, spending eight hours away from her jurisdiction.

He had compromised on his decision to withhold money from her until she had returned the bank account to both their names. Each week he had put fifty dollars on the kitchen table without comment. This left him sixty-five dollars a week and he was carrying the money in his wallet, unable to decide about an independent bank account, waiting for a flare-up to push him to a definite action.

But he felt they would come to a settlement. He felt the dreary inevitableness of it. He had tried once or twice during the first week to open a discussion and, being unsuccessful, had accepted the silence. With relief, really. He did not know exactly why, but this time the atonement had turned into a reprieve. Perhaps the tolerol was making him indifferent. Perhaps he was filled with a secret pride at his ability not to drink. Whatever it was he felt a detachment that was strange to him. Occasionally he had the longing to share his hope and exhilaration about staying sober with her to use this as a basis for a real reconciliation, but he knew she would reject him on terms that originated beyond the confines of their



home and marriage. Marriage to her meant a complete and uncompromising submission to the union. It was more devastating than accepting holy orders. One submitted to her authority instead of God's or that of some hierarchy.

By tonight we will be talking to each other again, he thought now. He had started to sense her moving in that direction yesterday. She had spoken more kindly to the girls in his presence. She had served him a second helping at supper before he could get up himself. After supper she had sat on the sofa in such a way that her thighs were exposed and this morning she had left her bedroom door open while he was shaving at the mirror by the open bathroom door so that he could see her strip off her pyjamas. She had stood sideways to him, naked. He could see her fine breast and the roundness of her behind. He was certain she knew he was looking. She turned her back slowly to him and then stepped out of view. It was the promise held out to him. And he did love and long for the sight and feel of her body. She came into view once more in her underwear. Her body was still tanned from the summer and looked darker yet against the pure white underwear. He had an impulse now to take her violently in a great, cleansing action, but at this point she had made believe she was conscious of him for the first time and had half-closed her door. The deception poisoned him. He slammed the bathroom door in reply.

The pattern of his day's activities had not changed very much. He was still caught in the need to daydream of wealth. He still alternated between vindictiveness and love. He accepted blame at ten o'clock and at eleven enumerated the points of self-justification. He grew tense in anticipation of a particularly important sales call and sometimes felt weak, as though he would faint. This would usually be about an hour before lunch. After a call at that time he would take a couple of tolserol and then try consciously to relax. He would park his car at some view of a woodland or sweeping field and sit there staring off. What can happen, really? he would ask, and then he would succeed in casting off his nervousness and would go the rest of the day driving slowly between calls, listening to the car radio, remembering long-ago incidents in his life. At two or three o'clock he would take two more tolserol and the afternoon would pass quietly. He would smile tolerantly at other drivers in the snarled traffic of some city.

He was occasionally disturbed about the tolserol. It was supposed not to be habit forming and not to have any ill effects on any of the vital organs and he had no craving for it, but he had begun

to depend on it as he had depended on the bottle. One morning he had forgotten to take some tablets with him and he had gone through the morning with a nagging fear that some crisis would arise. In the early afternoon he had grown more apprehensive and as a safeguard had bought a half-pint of whisky which he still had unopened. Then he had been worried about where to hide it, for he knew that his wife would keep searching the car and even if it weren't opened, she would think he had been drinking. He had found a new hiding place, in an air vent near the heater. He realized vaguely that the tolserol, while relieving tension, was preventing him from making a final break from his former self-induced need for relief. On Friday afternoon, Saturday, and Sunday he did not take any because there was no need in view of the leisure time away from work.

"I'm going next door to visit," Anne suddenly said. "If you go out I want a bottle of wine."

"I'll get it after supper," he answered.

Yes, the wine. The next step towards undressing and getting into bed.

During time-outs, while the game he was watching on the television was in progress, Ralph jumped up and set the kitchen table for supper. It was the price for wasting several hours. He repeatedly told himself that he should not help out with housework but the guilt of idleness had become too deeply ingrained and needed some act to ease it. He knew his wife would consider his getting the supper as a desire for reconciliation. Though she had long ago ceased to think of his helping out as a voluntary act of kindness and concern, in this instance it would suit her mounting desire to place such an interpretation on his act. Ralph was aware of this, but despite his cynicism he could not restrain himself and he began to anticipate the evening with some excitement.

Once during the game he got up suddenly and went to the desk with the absurd hope that his wife might have changed the bank account back. He found her bankbook. It was uncanceled. Her bankbook, he thought. Her children. Her husband. A sharp bitterness seized him. He remembered the half-pint out in his car. All her actions and decisions now were based ostensibly on thought for the children. He had a sudden clear vision of what was happening. You can't use your concern for one person as a basis for condemnation of another, he protested. She was covering her need to destroy him by intensifying her love for the girls. The thought that really dismayed him was that he deserved what was happening because he

had allowed his kindness to degenerate into servitude. The half-pint again intruded itself. To hell with it! If it kills me I won't drink. She'd love that, though not tonight particularly. He went out to the kitchen and swallowed two tolserol, placing a faith in them far exceeding their medicinal value.

Seated again before the football game he tried to compose himself but he kept forgetting the down and even, in the restricted view, the position of the ball on the field. He lay back on the couch and closed his eyes and then he had a thought that was almost like a revelation. He began to sketch out a course of action. Tonight he would follow the path of renewed relations and tomorrow in the freshness of the truce he would ask Anne to go to a meeting with him. Martin and Abbie were picking him up to go to a meeting in Marblehead and he had heard that quite a number of husbands and wives attended the Sunday-night meeting there. If she would go to a meeting perhaps she would become convinced that his efforts were sincere and laudable and that she should offer her help in small ways.

The children came in before the football game was over. They went laughing and pushing into the sun porch to listen to their record player and talk excitedly about some small intrigue. The game ended and he prepared supper. He asked Shirley to telephone next door to tell her mother.

When his wife came into the kitchen through the back door, Ralph saw immediately that she had had several drinks. She was flushed and laughing and looked much prettier than she normally did. He felt no ill will that she was able to drink and he was not. He was often the victim of self-pity, rarely of envy. She sat down at the table and began eating rapidly and talking to the girls. They all put their knives at once into the mustard jar and laughed, and even Ralph joined in. But he was conscious of that unity that bound the two girls and their mother into an entity that excluded him. He sat at the table with almost the privilege and sufferance granted a guest. But now Anne began using the children as stepping stones towards the accomplishment of her desire.

"Would you like to go for a ride after supper?" she asked them. She turned to Ralph. "If you're going to get a bottle of wine we might as well go along and stop for some ice cream." She could not stop herself from throwing a barb. "We might as well get some use from the car."

Somehow he did not like entering the liquor store for the wine. It was as if the clerk knew that he had not been drinking and

thought he was now about to start in again. How many times had he gone in for a bottle of wine for his wife and had bought a half-pint of whisky which he had hidden in his hip pocket before this very clerk?

"I haven't seen you around," the clerk said.

"No," he answered.

"Anything else?" the clerk asked.

"No."

He wondered how long you had to be sober before these small irritating experiences disappeared. Perhaps never. Perhaps sobriety carried its stigmas, too. His wife opened the bottle, as he drove along, and took a drink from it. It was not true that everyone who drank from a bottle was an alcoholic. She would not want an ice cream cone. But again she might. He had once seen her drink beer and eat chocolates at the same time. Good Christ! it wasn't human.

"It's warm and pleasant out," Anne said.

"Yes," he agreed.

"We want to be home in time for the start of the Jackie Gleason show," Ellen said. "We can stay up till ten o'clock."

"Half-past nine," Anne said.

"You said ten at lunch."

"I've changed my mind."

The pattern, the pattern, he thought. She had taken Shirley in front and sat in the middle so that her thigh was against his. But he knew that at a certain point in the evening's charades, he would forget the artificiality and in his desire accept the rules as valid.

On reaching home Anne insisted that the girls get in their pyjamas before sitting down to television so that they could get directly in bed afterward. She poured a glass of wine and followed Shirley and Ellen upstairs.

Ralph remembered the past; now, while she had liquor on her breath and couldn't smell his, would be a wonderful opportunity for a few drinks.

The point about the pyjamas did not escape him. It was certain that Anne would come down in hers and that she would be changing now, perhaps timing herself for the sound of his footsteps. He rose reluctantly and went up the stairs. As he reached the upper hall she was standing just within her room and had raised her white slip above her head. Her face was hidden in its folds and her whole nakedness stood there beneath the cloud of white nylon that was agitated by her struggle. He stood still, staring. She lifted the slip away and tossed her head to settle her hair and then with

an expression of pleased alarm quickly held the slip before her breasts and seized it between her thighs. She gave an unconscious little wiggle of anticipation and smiled in a coy fashion. He walked directly to her and put his arms around her.

"Oh, no," she said, pushing him back against his hands. "Not after the way you've acted."

A weariness descended on him. He did not know if he had the will to continue the game. She was laying down the rules; he should feel repentant, she would have to be coerced, if he was good she might eventually relinquish. In the meantime she would display the reward of his capitulation. She struggled against his grasp more fiercely.

"The children," she warned.

He slapped her on the buttocks, somewhere between play and punishment, and left the room abruptly.

In the living-room the opening fanfare of the Gleason programme was taking place. One model after another walked into the camera so that their faces loomed larger and larger in a ghastly devouring beauty in which intimacy was scaled out of existence. It was the magazine page come alive in a frightful, Frankenstein manner. Good Christ, he thought, if one of them opens her mouth the viewer will disappear down her gullet. He retreated and went out the front door and sat in the darkness on the steps. The street was quietly and discreetly illuminated. The stars were out, and the moon. Between the separated lamps the mellow light ran softly along the road and overflowed on to the lawns. A long-ago loneliness sat with him enchantingly. The girls. When they grow up will they remember such moments and wonder why they are gone? And who knows? Who knows? his mind echoed.

He sat there for half an hour and then an accumulated chill drove him back to the living-room. As he stepped in his wife peered sharply at him and Shirley and Ellen looked up from where they were sitting on the floor. He read their suspicions. Often he had stepped outside supposedly for a breath of air but really to sneak rapidly to his car for a drink or to carry in a bottle he had had no opportunity to get previously. In the suburbs even the simple act of stepping outdoors in the night had become something unusual and significant. Even if he had not been an alcoholic everyone would have been vaguely disturbed.

"What have you been doing?" Anne asked.

"Nothing. Sitting on the steps."

"Why?"

"In the name of good Jesus," he burst out. "Does there have to be a reason for looking at the night or breathing fresh air?"

"What are you so mad about now?" she asked.

She was curled up on the divan with a glass of wine within reach on the coffee table. He did not answer but went into the kitchen to make some coffee.

The front door bell rang and his wife called, "Will you see who that is?"

He heard her retreating upstairs. By the time he reached the living-room, Shirley had opened the front door. It was Martin.

"I was just on my way by and thought I'd stop in a moment to say hello," he said.

"Come on in."

Ralph introduced his children, who grinned and stared up at Martin quizzically. They looked from their father to the stranger while the conversation continued losing interest in the television. Anne returned wearing a dressing-gown over her pyjamas. She was rather flustered and she twisted and turned a bit as though shaking her femininity into place before resuming her seat on the divan.

"Martin was at the hospital with me," Ralph mentioned.

"Well," Anne said complacently. She looked at Martin, then down, then up again quickly, startled, as though she might have recognized him and the recognition threatened her.

"Do you live in Deering?" she asked.

"Yes," Martin said. "I've been here for ten years or more."

"I've never seen you around in the supermarkets or anywhere."

"God has been good to me," Martin said. "I have been spared the supermarket and the dime store. I just dropped in to make sure that Ralph would be going to the Marblehead meeting tomorrow night."

"You didn't say anything about going out tomorrow night," Anne accused, turning to him.

How could he, in front of Martin, remark that he couldn't have spoken of it because they hadn't even been speaking to each other? He wondered if Anne was simply obtuse. But no, she seemed to have an instinct for creating small sinuous situations in which he appeared at fault. Even her pleasant, happy moments were filled with tiny condemnations and accusations, envious remarks made in a laughing tone, avarice not quite concealed by her expressed admiration.

"It slipped my mind," he said, accepting a surface blame.

"Why don't you come with us?" Martin asked. "It's a fairly large meeting with many husbands and wives."

"I don't know," Anne said uncertainly.

It struck Ralph how little he was contributing either to the conversation or the course of events. His plan to ask Anne to go to the meeting was forestalled. It was as if his personality was neutral. He could not bring himself to urge her in front of Martin. With a small feeling of spite he offered Martin a cup of coffee, knowing that Anne did not want to prolong the visit.

"No thanks," Martin said. "I have to leave. If you decide to go just come along," he said to Anne. "There will be room in the car."

Ralph stepped outside with Martin and closed the front door.

"How is it going?" Martin asked.

"Well, I'm staying sober."

"Have you thought any about that fourth step?"

"I haven't thought about any of the steps," Ralph said. "I've just thought about staying sober and trying to be happy about it. But happy? There's so many things besides the booze."

"Yes," Martin said. "Particularly love and sex that get all fouled up with booze. I'll see you tomorrow night. You know, if you ever get filled with self-loathing it's nice to remember there are thousands who have committed the very same acts you have. No new sin has been invented in all of recorded time. To have a new sin you would have to have a new man. What an idiotic idea! Even the Communists couldn't do it."

Martin walked away a few steps and turned.

"Don't take an absolute position, Ralph," he said. "It's only a matter of degree. Struggle towards a lesser degree of what you dislike in yourself."

When Ralph stepped back inside he resumed his seat silently. He had sensed a deep happiness in Martin. What had caused it? His divorce? Just staying sober? Martin, who had been as tortured as any of them, but more voluble.

"Well," Anne said. "what was all that about?"

"What?"

"What were you talking about out there?"

"Was there no moment that should not be accounted for?"

"Booze," he said loudly,

Shirley and Ellen gave him quick, uneasy glances.

"That's all?" Anne asked. She had refilled her glass of wine and looked at him with a half-flushed smile of anticipation.

"He wondered if you might come."

"Really? He's nice-looking, isn't he?"

God, she can't be trying to arouse jealousy, he thought incredulously.

"Well, I might go," she said. "Yes, I really might."

I must make an effort.

"I think you ought to. You hear both sides of the thing, sometimes."

"Yes, what about me, my side? All those men calling and coming around to help you. How about me? Who comes to help me? Get me another glass of wine, will you?"

He rose and took her glass to the kitchen. The bottle, on the counter, is almost half-empty. She would have resented anyone offering her help, even though she was jealous of the attention he received from Martin and Tom and Dick. She did not believe she needed any help. It was the same old story. She just couldn't stand for even a bit of him to escape her. He heard her speaking sharply to the girls, telling them to go to bed. They came into the kitchen to kiss him good night. He was happy suddenly that his breath was unladen and that he did not have to kiss their foreheads as he had often done in the past.

"Tell you what," he said. "Wake me up early and I'll come down and cook a special breakfast for you."

"Okay, Dad," they said.

He wrestled them around a little, tickled them both, and chased them halfway up the stairs. Then he carried the glass of wine into the living-room.

Anne had removed her dressing-gown and was lying back. She reached up her hand for the glass and said "Thank you." He could see the dark circles of her nipples through the partially transparent nylon of her pyjamas. The pyjamas were white. One of her legs was flexed at the knee and she let it fall to the side. She looked from him to the television screen as though unaware of her appearance and his scrutiny.

Ralph was instantly aroused. His objective reflections vanished. He lit a cigarette for himself and for his wife, a voluntary gesture of acknowledgement that he was ready to participate. He seated himself on the lower end of the divan at his wife's feet.

"I told the girls I would cook breakfast if you want to sleep late in the morning," he said.

"Turn out the light, will you?" she asked.

It took him a half-hour to get her unclothed. In the face of planned surrender she fought a rear-guard action to avoid complete disorder, allowing the advance of a hand, repelling the spear-head, using the camouflage of reluctant acquiescence. Ralph became absorbed in the contest. The voices from the television were



sounds of distant engagements focusing his endeavours and his mind on the periphery of passion.

At the end of the half-hour, delaying but receptive, Anne found it necessary to squirm loose, and retreated to the stairs. Ralph raised his eyebrows wordlessly and stood up to turn off the television.

When Ralph came into the bedroom, Anne was already under the covers. She closed her eyes as he looked at her and did not open them until he was in bed beside her. Then she reached up and snapped out the bed lamp so that the room was in darkness.

When it was all over, he kissed her gently on the forehead and moved from under the covers.

"Good night, Anne," he said. "You can sleep late tomorrow."

She did not answer. He heard her burrowing in the bed and knew that she would fall soundly asleep. In his room he sat on the edge of the bed, staring out the window at a street lamp and smoking while his blood cooled and his pulse slowed down.

When he awoke the sun was in his room. He opened his eyes with happiness, being calm and rested. Had he dreamed that he should be so happy? He could not remember. He yawned loudly. Immediately there was a wild trampling of feet, his door burst open, and his daughters flung themselves upon him with cries and squeals of delighted alarm.

"Hey, hey!" he cried, protecting himself and then seizing them both as they struggled.

"It was a race!" Shirley gasped. "Don't tickle, Dad, don't tickle! Who got here first after you made a noise was the race."

"I won, I won," Ellen claimed.

"It was a tie," he judged. "You almost splintered my splinter."

They giggled and laughed and he put an arm around each.

"How is your splinter now?" Shirley asked.

"Have I got a splinter, Dad?" Ellen asked. "Let us under the covers."

"It's a muscle, I think," he said. "Well, what will we have for breakfast? Have you girls discussed the menu?"

"Cheese omelet," Shirley said.

"Put onions in it, Dad," said Ellen. "Make some nice fried potatoes."

"Some tomato juice, too? Who sets the table?"

"That's what the race was for."

"Shirley sets the silver, Ellen the china."

"The good silver, Dad?"

"Oh, sure, and the china from the set. Everything just so."

"Big deal this morning!" Ellen exclaimed. "Napkins, too?"

"Like the Astor, kid, like the Astor," he said. "Now off me!" he cried, rolling first one, then the other, off on to the floor. They flung themselves back on him and finally he carried them, one under each arm, out of the room and down the stairs.

They liked the escape from Wheaties and Ralston, the bland, fast breakfast before school. Now they vied with each other to put small elegant touches on the table, a little vase with a paper rose, a tablecloth over the formica-topped table. When everything was cooked they made Ralph sit down and acted as waitresses, calling him sir, and asking if the coffee suited him, serving him first and then sitting down and gobbling their own food. Remembering the mornings when even the smell of food would set him retching with dry heaves, when the children ate in depressed silence, Ralph was deeply grateful and happy. How good it is to be sober, he thought. Just simply to be sober.

After breakfast they played anagrams on the living-room rug, arguing about time limits and the number of words that would win.

In the midst of this Anne appeared.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "Don't get everything upset. I vacuumed that rug yesterday."

They all straightened up in mock silent goodness.

"What a mess that kitchen is. Things get broken easy enough without using the good set of dishes for breakfast. Everything greasy on the stove."

"I'll clean it up after," Ralph said, rising from the floor.

"Aren't you going to finish the game, Dad?"

"I'm going for the Sunday paper."

"You girls get dressed," Anne said.

He went out the front door. The day dimmed, the prospect darkened.

## XXIII

COLLEGE had taught the manager nothing new, David thought. It was the same old trick any red-nose alcoholic bartender would think of, filling all the bottles with cheap whisky, except for several of the very best brands that might be ordered straight by a discerning

drinker, getting the kickback from a crooked salesman who billed him for good whisky, knocking down on the register by making out slips for low-priced drinks after the customer had paid the high price. The new manager was giving him ten dollars cash a week above his recorded pay for his share of the chiseling. Whenever he took the ten dollars he pounded one fist into his palm to still his uneasiness. He did not like participation in irregularities initiated by someone else. He himself would have been more subtle and careful in adjusting the inequity of his pay. He was very afraid at times. The broken probation loomed threateningly.

Except for Helen he did not want anyone to know what he was doing. He felt impelled to keep his life a secret, so he avoided all exchanges of intimacies with anyone who might talk at the bar. If a man mentioned Lynn or Boston he kept his knowledge of these cities to himself. Because he was pleasant and appeared intelligent his contrasting small fund of expressed facts was flattering to the customers, who could credit themselves with a sagacity they hardly possessed. He was considered an excellent bartender, even by the women. They admired his helpless blue eyes and curly black hair and thought the cynical twist of his mouth was just a defence for shyness.

The days of sobriety grew. Sometimes he would think of them as a prisoner might think of his sentence. Two weeks, he would think. A month now. But unlike the prisoner he had no anticipation of release. Any pride or contentment he might have felt had a wry quality and was squeezed from him as a derogatory admission.

At Helen's suggestion they had purchased a new car. The payments were high so that they were always broke. Helen made a file of their unpaid bills and began methodically to make small payments. What was amazing was the type of bills they owed. Twenty dollars for flowers to a shop in Lynn. Ten dollars for a ring to a chain jewellery store. Who had the ring? Twenty-five dollars for a clock radio they no longer had. Had they pawned it? They had no ticket. In view of these irritating debts it might have seemed astounding that they considered a new car, but Helen felt David needed something to correct his aimlessness. He loved the car. When he finished work at one in the morning he picked up Helen, or she would be waiting in the cocktail lounge, and they would ride through the night listening to the radio. They would get back to the trailer at dawn. David would sleep till noon. •

Helen had had an interview with her lawyer that had been dis-

couraging. He could not present a very strong case with her living in a trailer, he said. Furthermore, their stay at Greenleaf Hill was bound to come out under questioning. He advised a year's continuous sobriety while he blocked her mother's moves to get permanent custody. Her mother, Helen discovered, had enrolled Douglas at a parochial school, so even the religious argument was valueless. It all seemed so lacking in reason. Her mother had run around and had been divorced and still got drunk once in a while. Helen could not sense the relative degrees of respectability and was inclined to place the occasional and the chronic sinner in the same category.

Their defences were permanently shattered, she thought at times. Only a complete hiding could allow them to start new. So she acquired David's furtiveness and lied adroitly. Her son, she said, was in a private school in the South. She pretended it was David's child. She never mentioned having been previously married. Her conversations with other people became filled with sudden laughter and changes as she avoided questions. The person to whom she was talking became indefinably uneasy and slightly bewildered. In consequence, everyone said she was lively and amusing but no one became her friend. Unstable, some of them said.

It was the same with David in the bar. Everyone liked him, no one invited him anywhere. Towards each other they were very tender and sentimental, protecting each other from the world. They bought each other small amusing presents and in bed they petted each other constantly.

Only to Ralph and Martin did they speak with honesty. Ralph came on Thursdays at noon. Helen had a lunch ready. They would look at the calendar and one would say, "Well, what do you know? A month now since Greenleaf." Then they would rise and shake hands ceremoniously. David and Helen asked after Evelyn and Abbie whom Ralph saw at meetings.

"Don't you go to meetings?" Ralph asked.

"Nah," Helen said. "Where?"

"Why don't you go here?"

"I work here," David said. "You have to answer too many questions. I'd just as soon these yokels didn't know anything about me."

Ralph, who felt that he had to attend meetings to keep his condition in his mind, merely shook his head doubtfully.

"What?" Helen said. "We see you and Martin. That's enough. We have our own little meeting."

On Thursday one week David, who had been called down to the

motel in the morning, burst back into the trailer just after Ralph had arrived.

"Holy suffering Christ!" he shouted. "Do you know what he wanted me for, do you know?"

"A raise in pay?" Helen asked.

"Don't clown it now. To be measured for uniform shirts! A bartender with a uniform, good Christ! The shirts are to be pink with a charcoal trim and my name embroidered on them. He wanted to know did I want David or Davey on the shirts. Me and the waitress in pink and charcoal!"

Ralph and Helen laughed but David was really disturbed. The picture he had of himself as a quiet, manly, reserved bartender was outraged. How could you have any weight or dignity in a pink shirt that was trimmed around the collar and cuffs like some broad-assed secretary's shirt?

Being in proximity to booze did not bother him. He was not tempted to drink. A single bottle might have proven more alluring than a loaded shelf. Beneath the bar he kept a small bottle of vitamin B compound and three or four times a day he would take a small swig from it. He imagined it helped him. Actually, he needed some definite act to establish his will and the vitamin B served this purpose harmlessly. In the kitchen serving the main dining-room there was a considerable turnover in help because of the low wages, and like many such places it became a haven for alcoholics who could not find employment elsewhere. Though none of them knew of David's trouble they sought him out with an unerring instinct. He protected them as much as he could but he knew it was dangerous to help them out with drinks from the bar. Instead he loaned them money so they could buy a bottle of their own. Only when one of them shook uncontrollably did he pour out a big hooker and sneak it to him. He felt kind and fatherly towards them. At the drunken non-alcoholic in the bar he looked with amused tolerance and sometimes with pity. Keep it up, keep it up, he would murmur to himself, you'll get trapped.

But in bed, when Helen fell asleep before him, he would lie awake with a fear that was growing larger and larger within him, the knowledge that he had no trade or profession or any way of ever establishing himself and Helen. The thought of remaining a bartender over the years was abhorrent.

Then, too, he saw the causes of his situation not as a basis for a corrective understanding but as a defence for his indirection. His mother had hung herself, an alcoholic. He had found the grotes-

quely hanging body. Was it not natural then that his lonely horror should turn to self-pity and self-indulgence? But the real wound of his mother's death lay deeper than this recognition of surface results. It came in the nameless shaking emptiness of spirit that haunted him at odd moments, while at work, sometimes even in Helen's arms, once at the sight of a certain woman's face in the lounge, or arising from his dreams, where the illogical sequence and the irrational emotion seemed to foreshadow an insanity that might spill over into his waking hours.

Repeatedly he had a common alcoholic dream, of wanting a drink desperately and of having the drink forever just beyond reach. He never mentioned this dream (he would have discovered that both Ralph and Martin had had it often) but chose rather to see in it an indication that his alcoholism had a deeper and more fateful aspect. Or if he had been attending meetings he would have been constantly aware that there are no unique phases of alcoholism, that there are always a number of people who have had the same or similar experiences.

Towards Martin he gradually developed a deep affection such as he had never had for any man. Sometimes he stared at him with a look of naked adoration, with his crooked lips in a tender smile that erased the cynical look. He would recite the list of small crises that had taken place in the motel and shrug them away, pretending and then convincing himself that he was indifferent to them. He could see that Martin enjoyed Helen's wit and he would watch them both with a quiet love and a longing to be able to perform some great act that would bind the three of them together in happiness for all time. He felt sheltered beside Martin's height when he stood up and he could not help touching him some way.

"Davey, why don't you go to a few meetings?" Martin asked.

"Maybe I will. Maybe after I'm sober a little longer. Oh, what the hell, this is enough, isn't it? Coming down to visit you. You give me all I need."

"You're wrong, Davey," Martin said. "I can't follow the day-by-day turnings of your tensions and thoughts any more than you could for me. But at a meeting you might find three or four small points of worry that would be resolved and that would otherwise keep gnawing you."

"Nothing's gnawing at me."

"Nothing, Davey?"

"The probation haunts me at times."

Martin was silent for a time.

"Are you sure it's the probation, Davey? It doesn't strike me as that critical. The chance of its coming up seems slight. Are you sure you're not using it as a focal point for some deeper, unrecognized fear. It's hard to peel off the dead skin of accumulated thought. That's why meetings are good, Davey. Those small contacts provide points of new recognition."

"Oh, don't worry about me, Martin," he said. "I've had it. Like you said at the hospital, it has nothing new to offer me but death."

"Don't get yourself overtired, Davey. Don't let the job bother you. Eat well. Take time to eat. Get outside yourself."

"Okay, kid," David said, grinning at him and pushing his chest gently.

Martin looked so strong, so kind. He knew so much. But he wasn't a psalm-singer. I can always come to him, David thought. What do I need all those other bastards for? What do they mean to me? What do I mean to them? Only Helen and Martin, the rest can go to hell. He drove away furiously in the first dead shadows of dawn.

He worked behind the bar from two o'clock till four, then he had two hours off and worked from six to one. On an afternoon in early November the manager came in with an inspector from the state liquor commission. As soon as he was introduced David began to tremble within. His first thought was that the inspector had come to examine the contents of the bottles on the shelves. The manager engaged the inspector in conversation about the bar's furnishings. David's mind rapidly calculated probable questions, answers, developments, and flight. It would be foolish to face charges with the broken probation on record. But the inspector presented an unexpected threat when he disclosed the reason for his visit.

"Have you ever been arrested for anything?" he asked, looking sharply at David.

"Arrested?" David repeated with a look of innocent bewilderment. "I was pulled in for speeding once."

The inspector smiled. "No, I mean for a felony. Where's your home town?"

Before he could fathom the reason for the question, David had answered, "Lynn."

"Well, there's a new regulation in effect for bartenders in the state. You'll have to provide a certificate from the police department of your home town that you've never been arrested for any felony. Send it in to the liquor commission within a week."

"Oh. All right," David said, turning away to wipe some glasses.

His first reaction when the inspector left was to run immediately. He swallowed some vitamin B compound, lit a cigarette, and realized his jaw was shaking. Now it starts, now it starts, he thought portentously. It was the curtain going up, the inevitable being established. He looked at his watch. It was half-past three, a half-hour to go. For a moment he thought of taking a drink. There was no one in the bar or lounge. An air of neglect and abandonment hung over the room. A stray wisp of smoke from the inspector's cigar lingered wraithlike, searching above the deserted tables. He knew he would drink if he tried to last out the half-hour. He was dry-drunk and mind-sick now. He came out from behind the bar and looked across the corridor to the lobby. The inspector had gone, the manager was alone.

"There aren't any customers," he said. "I'd like to go home early. I don't feel so hot."

"What's the matter?" the manager said.

"My stomach. I heaved twice and still feel sick, chilled. Maybe you'd better call in the substitute for tonight. If I'm this way I won't be much good."

"You look pale. Okay, I'll see you tomorrow."

David burst into the trailer and fell slack into a chair.

"You're home early," Helen called from the rear. "What's the matter, Davey?" she asked with alarm as she came into the tiny sitting-room and saw him. "Did you drink?"

"No," he said. "I guess we're done. We'll have to beat it."

"Beat it?"

"Pack up and run."

"Oh, quiet down, Davey," she said. "Stop playing it up, whatever it is. Here, have some coffee. Now tell me what happened."

"You've got a week, then," she said, after he had described the inspector's visit. "All right. Take tonight off. Here, I saved two phenos from the hospital. Now let's get dressed and go out and eat and then we'll take a ride down to Martin's. He'll see this thing from the outside. In the meantime, forget about it."

In the car the aggravating sense of urgency returned to him. Within a short distance he had gotten up a speed of sixty-five miles an hour. But the phenobarbital began to affect him and he yawned, took one hand from the wheel to rub it over his face, and relaxed the foot which had been straining clawlike at the accelerator pedal. The speed dropped to forty-five. He turned on the radio, opened a window, increased the speed once more, pulled out to pass a truck,



decided not to, and let the car slow down to forty, at which speed he continued in a weary resignation to the condition of his reflexes and torpid mind and the separated traffic.

Martin was home. He and Abbie had just finished eating in the kitchen. Abbie wore an apron. Even so he could not help noticing her shape. Not only had her face changed but her body seemed to have acquired new dimensions and rhythms. She was pulled tighter together somehow, like those ads. She moved about the kitchen without a waste step and seemed to pick up things before touching them as though her hands were magnetized. She and Helen embraced.

"I'm in a jam," David said to Martin.

"Okay, Davey," he said. "Here, take a cup of coffee and we'll go in the other room. You're shaking, Davey. When you first came in I thought you had been drinking. You're not, so you don't have to get out of that one. Now this other thing, what is it?"

"Oh, this inspector from the liquor commission came in and I have to produce a certificate that I've never been arrested for a felony. I guess I'm all through with my job."

Martin looked at him without speaking for a moment.

"I've worked in a government office for twenty years, Davey," he said. "Where it is a matter of producing a piece of paper with writing on it, there's always a way. I've juggled property records, personnel files, and inspection reports many times. Not for crooked purposes but only to have records match or accounts balance. Let's examine this thing of yours. Do you have to sign such a statement personally?"

"No. It has to come from the police department."

"What police department?"

"My home town."

"What address did you give when you took the job?"

"Lynn."

"You were arrested in Boston, weren't you? What address did you give at that time?"

"I said I was from Worcester. Funny, I remember thinking that I didn't want my father in Lynn to know anything about it. It might have appeared in the papers if news was short. I was afraid of his finding out."

"When were you put on probation?"

"A little over two years ago. Two years ago last summer."

"I think you're in a panic over nothing, Davey. Let me make a phone call. I know this alcoholic who was once a lieutenant of

police in Boston. He got bounced over booze and I helped him get a job in a government warehouse. Want some more coffee?"

Abbie and Helen came into the room while Martin was talking. They sat down and listened.

"So the only place that would be notified is Worcester, then?" Martin asked. "Look, you must know someone in the Lynn police department. On some pretext call them up tomorrow just to make sure, will you? And then call me at my office? Be good, boy. I'll see you around."

There was no danger, then, David thought with a trace of disappointment. He wanted to be pushed towards something, to have the choice made for him. Now he would return to his job with its vexations that he pretended to look at with indifference. The climax hadn't come off. He would have to suffer through another dreary scene.

"Let's go somewhere," he said suddenly.

"There's a meeting in Auburn if you'd like to go," Martin suggested.

"I couldn't sit through a meeting," he said. "Let's take a ride in to Boston."

"You two go. I'll stay and talk to Abbie," Helen said.

He drove to Stollay Square through the dark chill evening, and parked the car. The neon lights whirled and danced. The drunks by now had made their touch, had earned a dollar washing dishes, or had fallen back on a can of sterno if they had failed to raise a bottle of wine. One or two wandered by, looking at them with narrow calculation.

"I lived here," David said. "It was my life, these few blocks around. I know every doorway, all the rotten smells of fried food and the stink of piss. It seemed like it was always night, or if it was day it was cloudy and raining."

"Don't go back to it, Davey," Martin said. "Unless you really liked it, unless despite all the shakes and heaves and delirium you really wanted it more than anything else. Because it was simple, you know, Davey. Everything reduced to one necessity. And for that shedding of all restraining knowledge and all obligation, a little suffering as the price. The price is always there. Don't come looking at it, Davey. You may find yourself with a sweet sick longing to return."

"How long have we been sober now?"

"A little over two months."

"I never went that long before."

"Three months is a bad time, Davey. Three months, six months."

"Why? Why should it be harder one time than another?"

"Maybe because they seem like completed periods. Unconsciously we set goals. Maybe it's a physical change or a memory running down. And it isn't because it's harder, it's because it's easier. You can always fight an enemy; you get ambushed by indifference."

"I'm tired," David said abruptly. "I guess I'll get Helen and go home," he said.

He began to whistle softly as rain came down and jagged light streaked the black polished pavements. He felt proud and safe and strong behind the wheel of the new car, in the small, warm, dimly lighted interior. He would have liked to have driven all night. The song he whistled was "Beautiful Dreamer." Martin was silent. The song lent a welcoming sadness to David's spirit. It was easy, he thought. You just ride along, that's all. You wait and you ride along. The single gem of wisdom glistened as brightly as the pavements.

## XXIV

WHEN Abbie came down into the kitchen, Martin put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her forehead. She never made any response to this action of his. During the first few days at his house it had offered her a slight insult but then she had come to be comforted by this slight touch of his lips. It was a renewal of faith and at the same time she felt a humility and dependence from which she would have once recoiled but which now predicated a hope that was steadily growing stronger. Not being given much to self-examination or definition these new emotions seeded themselves and began to root before she was aware that any change in her response was taking place. Her continuing sobriety thus struck her as somewhat miraculous, and occasionally she would be conscious of the newness in her with a happiness that would pierce her and then fade away at a remembrance of her true condition or of the past. But she had surrendered and she confined her decisions to the small acts of living, dressing, washing, cooking, walking, eating.

"How long have I been without a drink, Martin?" she asked that morning as she began to prepare breakfast.

"Three weeks?" he said. "Maybe a little more."

"I've never gone that long for five years," she said.

The sun came brightly into the kitchen. Leaves lay in profusion on the lawn outside. When they left the air was chilled and invigorating. It had that quality of making one feel taller and stronger and yet considerably lighter, unconquerable in an ethereal way, as though the obstacle could be overcome merely by elevating oneself.

"The sheer joy of being merely alive and sober!" Martin exclaimed.

"And not pregnant," Abbie added ruefully.

She glanced about uneasily and entered the garage quickly. Martin had put her bag in the car the evening before at her insistence.

"Can you squeeze in, Abbie?" Martin asked.

"Just call me Florence," she said. "My name is Florence today."

She could not restrain a note of bitterness.

"It will be over," he said. "You're strong, Abbie"

"Strong," she said.

"All alcoholics are, I think. They go through physical and mental tortures that would kill ordinary people."

But it was not her physical condition about which she was primarily concerned now. It was the old stamped pattern of degradation, the sense of the inescapable reasserting itself so that the bright hope she had occasionally felt now seemed spurious. Even the day was false. It should have been damp and dirty. Yet she was depressed and disturbed for more than herself at this moment.

As they neared the hotel she said desperately, "I don't want you mixed up in this. I can't do it to you. It's all right to treat it off-hand like a visit to a dentist, but it's not, it's not."

"No," he agreed. "It's not. I'm a little scared too, Abbie, in a different way."

"You're not to come."

"It's unbearable to think of you there alone all that time."

"There is nothing you can do."

"Here's the money," he said, handing her an envelope as he steered with one hand.

"Park a block away from the hotel. I'll carry my bag."

"No, the hell with that. I'll drive you right to the door."

She was comforted by this action. It made her feel less furtive and soiled. The pavements were thronged with people hurrying to work in the bright morning, men with topcoats and brief cases, girls chattering in pairs, long-legged boys cutting rapidly through

the stream as though using shadows for stepping stones. In the midst of all this, she thought: Me, I'm the only one. The fish. Of them all only me. If I get through this. There were tears in her eyes as Martin stopped the car.

"Don't," he said, putting an arm about her shoulder.

"It's not the abortion," she said. "It's everything else. I can't tell you."

"There's no need, is there? Here, take this book. It will make you look casual, carrying it. You might be any woman, Abbie. If you feel like it, read a little."

"I might be any woman, but I'm not," she said.

In the hotel room she lay waiting. On the night table was the book Martin had given her and a wrist watch of his. Occasionally she rose up to look at the time, as she had once done tapering off a drunk. No sounds came from the street; the windows were closed; but ghostly footsteps passed in the carpeted hall. She waited each time for the footsteps to stop with a knock at the door or for the door to open without a knock, since she had left it unlocked as Helen had instructed. The waiting there in bed was a prolonged and fearful suspension. There was nothing to do, nothing to see but the anonymous walls and ceiling. The idea of a drink began to plague her. She had merely to pick up the phone and order a double whisky. What harm could it do?

But suddenly she shook as though already rum-sick and she clutched the bed clothes tight under her chin. No! she protested. If the doctor smelled it he would go away and she would be left still pregnant and started off on a drunk. There was the four hundred and fifty dollars in the envelope on the bureau. She could take it and disappear. Martin's money. Martin's watch that she looked at again. Martin's book.

She left the bed and raised the shades and the windows. Sunlight and the sharp fall air filled the room. From the high window she looked across a section of the city to the red brick homes terracing Beacon Hill. Some arrangement of light and shadow made the brick glow like coals. Above the hill white clouds were piled motionlessly. She had an intense longing to escape to this bright entrancing world. The chill air struck her thinly clad body with a pleasant pain. How beautiful the day is, she thought, not thinking of this particular day but of day as opposed to night. She turned slowly and entered the bathroom with its white obscenity.

She left the bathroom and pulled down the shades again, returning to the twilight in which she had lived. In bed she trembled

now and then. I'm not diseased anyway, she thought in an unthinking defence. Oh God, I can't die now. I wish Helen was here.

She remembered the money on the bureau with a precipitate sense of discovery. She could take fifty and tell the doctor she could raise only four hundred. But four hundred was too round a figure to reflect a ragged effort to raise the money. Four hundred and fifteen would be more convincing of honest failure. She went to the bureau and took the sheaf of bills from the envelope. There were forty-five tens. How had Martin gotten them? How had he been able to hide his complicity when he asked the teller for forty-five tens? Or had he gathered them from various stores and restaurants? A moment's sympathy for his secretive act restrained her hands. But she needed security from apprehension, she needed a base on which to build decision. She would have to take either thirty or forty dollars. Or sixty. Yes, sixty. That would be three hundred and ninety for the doctor. He would take it. For only a half-hour's work. The bastard, the butcher. When he had already taken the time to come to the hotel and she was lying there and there was the money? She put sixty dollars under the mattress and got into bed again.

Now that she had the money safe, the money that represented what booze had once been and that might yet be diverted to that warm immunity, Abbie relaxed. As if she had already started to drink, her thought swung radically and she became more lenient in her judgment, now that escape was assured, now that she could cease from the toilsome effort towards virtue. Poor Martin had been trying, anyway. But he wasn't cagey enough. You can't live by books and words, by empty vision. Kissing her like that, on the forehead. Some day he will kiss my mouth. If I am here. Some day it will be different. I'll go away and then come back, dressed differently, looking differently, from California or Canada, with new words and some kind of strength, something. And then it will be he who wants and I will help him.

When she raised herself to look at the watch once more she noticed the book Martin had given her to carry and she picked it up. It was called *Fruit Gathering*. The author was Tagore. Who was Tagore? She propped herself against the headboard of the bed and, holding the book on her lap, she let it fall open where the cover of a match folder had been inserted. She began to read.

"My night has passed on the bed of sorrow, and my eyes are tired. My heavy heart is not yet ready to meet morning with its crowded joys. Draw a veil over this naked light, beckon aside from

me this glaring flash and dance of life. Let the mantle of tender darkness cover me in its folds, and cover my pain a while from the pressure of the world."

The pages of the book fluttered to rest in her loose grip. She looked down again. There, on the flyleaf was his name, his handwriting, Martin Gray, and his address. Supposing something should happen? She swung her legs from the bed and sat there, tearing the flyleaf carefully and evenly from the book. Slowly she shredded it and then raised a shade and a window. She held out her hand and let the scraps blow out over the city. She returned to bed. I am unable, unable, she moaned to herself, without help.

The doctor entered quietly and put on the latch before turning or speaking. He was young, in his early thirties, with a sharp dark face and glasses, balding at the sides of his flat oiled hair. His expression was quite blank. He set his bag down, glanced at Abbie, and walked to the bureau where he picked up the envelope and counted the money.

"It's short," he said. "You were supposed to have four hundred and fifty."

"It's all I could raise," Abbie said humbly.

The doctor stared at her.

"I could pay the rest later."

"Why are your eyes bloodshot? Have you been crying?"

"Yes."

"Tears," the doctor said.

He moved to sit on the edge of the bed, raising his ophthalmoscope to look into her eyes. He lowered it, clicking off the light. Silently he wrapped her arm to take her blood pressure. He listened to her heart and lungs and tested her reflexes.

The doctor put some rubber gloves on the bureau. They were carefully wrapped in a white cloth. He entered the bathroom and washed for what seemed an interminable time. Abbie lay on her back with her head to one side, watching him. The bedcovers were folded over her stomach. When the doctor reached for his gloves she closed her eyes tightly. She heard his step.

Her eyes, like insects that might have settled on her, fluttered open and she saw some kind of a clamp in his hands. Her whole body was covered with a mucilaginous sweat that was chilled in some places and burning in others. Her flesh had gone limp and pliable. She felt the outrage of his hands upon her as she closed her eyes again, rolled her head away, and obeyed his orders.

The doctor remained silent and finished his work rapidly. He was

very precise in his movements. Evidently he had become quite efficient at abortions.

He went back into the bathroom and closed the door. She could hear him flush the toilet and begin washing once more. The sound of the running water increased the delirious climate. The room was unbearably hot.

"Don't get up and walk around," the doctor said, opening the bathroom door. He was drying his hands on a hotel towel. "At suppertime have something sent up. Will anyone be here to visit you?"

"No."

"Don't drink any alcohol. In the morning don't carry your bag. Take it easy for a week."

"I have two seconal. Is it all right to take them if I don't sleep?"

"Where are they?"

The doctor took the seconals and put some pills on the night table. He gave her instructions for taking them, closed his bag, and put on his coat that he had draped over a chair. At the door he hesitated and glanced at Abbie. His face was as expressionless as when he had entered.

"Good-bye," he said.

The afternoon passed in a peaceful, unresolved time. Abbie dozed, awakened briefly, dozed again. Unfamiliar images appeared and disappeared in the fringes of her sleep. Each time she awoke it was with an increasing happiness that seemed without cause. It was more than just relief. It had a sense of fresh vitality to which she was unaccustomed and she fell back asleep willingly, knowing that it would not dissipate itself, a little like a child awakening too early on a holiday morning.

The sound of the door opening and closing brought her fully awake finally. It was Martin. The concern on his face lingered even after he was aware of her recognition of him. He frowned briefly as though puzzled and then smiled at her uncertainly. The happiness surged up strongly in her. Her face was illuminated, pale, translucent, the ruddy stain of her wrongs drained. Her eyes were clear. Her lips smiled easily without the suggestion of the grimace that had marked her previous efforts to appear pleasant.

"You're not disturbed about my coming?" Martin asked.

Abbie shook her head, continuing to smile and holding her gaze to his eyes.

"Why are you so happy?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I don't know."



"Are you all right? Did the doctor come?"

"Yes. It's over," she said. "I just feel good, Martin. I don't know why."

He sat down beside the bed and picked up her hand.

"Don't worry it, then," he said. "Strange thing. One can work himself into a fit of despondency or anger or even, perhaps ecstasy, but I never heard of anyone working up a simple happiness. It's grace and therefore inexplicable."

"I did something, Martin," she said. "Reach under the mattress under my pillow."

His face fell into a grave anxiety.

"No," she protested at his look. "Not that."

His searching hand retrieved the money and he fanned the bills out. He grinned at her.

"You have the instincts of a shrewd housewife," he said.

"No, Martin," she answered. "It was just another bottle, a hole to crawl through. Now I don't need it. Not now, anyway," she said with a lingering superstition.

## XXV

OF THE six patients who had been together at Greenleaf Hill, Evelyn Johnson was the least tempted to drink in the months following. She was just too healthy and happy after her initial adjustment. Except when actually attending AA meetings with Martin and Abbie, the thought of alcohol very rarely entered her mind. She had no deep-seated nervousness or intense craving such as attacks some older alcoholics. It was like an illness she had once had and from which she had completely recovered. The meetings to her were more in the nature of social gatherings of people who simply shared a common interest, like veterans, say, or amateur radio operators, and if Martin had not called for her regularly she would have stopped going entirely. But she was exceptionally fond of Martin and Abbie. With them she was more relaxed than she had ever been with any other friends.

She met Martin in Grover Cronin's store in Waltham one Saturday morning. He had just purchased a suit and she was coming down from the second floor in a beautiful new fall coat of a soft

green. She descended the stairs regally, restraining her energy energetically as though at any moment she might break loose in a wild joyful howl and come galloping down. Fortunately there were only two steps left when she saw him. She jumped these.

"Martin!" she cried, excited at the unexpected meeting.

"What has happened to you? You look like a Nereid rising on waves of benzedrine."

"Oooo, I'm just happy. I've bought a new coat and I've been to a beauty parlour."

"A beauty parlour can't do that to you. Come, let's have some coffee. Why are you really so happy?" He took her arm.

"It's Robert," she said.

"Yes?"

"He's in love with me."

"After all these years? In love?"

"Well, it is strange, isn't it? But he must have been all along and my drinking held him off. And he's proud, too, you know. Isn't it nice to be an alcoholic? If I hadn't been he would probably be a little tired of me by now and instead it's all new and wonderful."

The small changes in her life were amazing to her. She no longer awoke with tiredness and dread, of course. She was gay and laughing at breakfast and even Robert, who had been a chronic bore on waking, now sat down cheerfully. The order of the day was consoling. After getting her family out of the house in a flurry of caresses and last-minute instructions, she washed the dishes and made the beds rapidly. At mid-morning she allowed herself a cup of coffee and sat quietly thinking. Mary had suggested this. If the telephone rang while she was completing her housework it no longer alarmed her. She approached it with anticipation and her responses were quick and open and she returned to her work without irritation. A new vitality erased the burdensome quality of her work. She found herself singing along with the radio. Robert had begun teaching her to drive so that the car need not stand idle while he was at work. And he had begun leaving her money on the dining-room table without mentioning it. When she found twenty dollars there the first time, she knew he wanted to spare her a discussion that might be painful to her. His concern made her quiver with tenderness for him.

Relationships in her living had assumed new dimensions and had become as keen and separated as objects of art, her friendship with Martin and Abbie, the sorrow that struck her when she saw Ralph, the triangular shape of herself and her two children, the quadrangu-

lar entity of her family, and her union with Robert, each of these offering various and distinct facets of fulfilment.

"I seem suddenly to have gotten all I longed for," Evelyn said to Martin as they sat opposite each other. "Why is that?"

"How would I know?" Martin said. "Perhaps simply that you have the ability for it and deserve it. Don't worry your happiness."

"I don't," she said. "Robert has changed as much as I have. My God! I used to think he was cold."

It was Robert's homecoming that the three of them awaited as the house gathered in the shadows of evening and smells of cooking drifted through the dining-room to the living-room. Evelyn watched a television programme with the children in the semi-darkness. The three of them lay together on the divan, entwined, laughing or scoffing. Evelyn was conscious of the dark cold outside the house and a shiver of gratitude for the shelter possessed her. This coming together of the family each day—familial awareness—was new to her; seemed to have a mystic quality. There was herself alone waiting, then the joining of the children in the expectation, and finally the accomplished square of Robert's arrival that brought with it the comfort of completion.

When he came home now he kissed them all in a wry ceremony in which he tried to hide his genuine affection, concealing his fondness in formality. But the children would not have it. They derided his dignity by clutching him and beginning simultaneous recitals of the day. Robert kissed Evelyn on the lips.

"Oh, Robert, I'm happy. I do love you so much," she whispered.

He remained silent. He was inept with love words. He moved away and then cleared his throat with a resumption of his separate bearing. Where once his separateness had wounded her, it now aroused in her a respect for his distinction, mingled with a tender poignancy for his disavowance.

Once he remarked, when they were sitting alone in the evening, "It was a good thing, your going to the hospital. I mean apart from the drinking. We needed some other kind of change, too."

He had discarded his habit of lengthy discussions of bills and sometimes Evelyn wondered if this had not been part of a pattern of distorted sobriety, the same as alcoholics were said to have patterns of behaviour. Perhaps he had used it as a means of talking to her at all or as a kind of cabalistic incantation to ward off the danger to his home. Now the bills were paid without any fuss and he did not anchor himself to the desk as though riding out a storm. Occasionally, if he felt himself offended, he tried to withdraw but

now she felt at liberty to approach him after a lapse of time and with caresses draw him back to normal civility. If he was reading she would let her hand run lightly over his head, as she passed or stop a moment to press his head against her breast. To rub against him or touch him at all gave her a luxurious feline satisfaction and in her throat she would feel a pleasant fullness as though she might purr. The whole family life and particularly her relationship with Robert had lost much of its strange mental quality and had become more animal with the leavening action of love.

In the morning she awoke with a happy vigour. Everything was quite new. She rolled and kneaded Robert into wakefulness and laughed at his hair all misplaced and his half-open eyes. She liked even the warm, stale, cavern smell of the bed out of which she rose.

"Once in a while I'm disturbed because I'm so happy," she said to Martin. "Or maybe it's because other people are not as happy as I am. I look at them and feel a little sorry for them."

"Don't talk yourself out of it," Martin said. "Don't get infected with the modern malady of believing happiness is manufactured. Or like poor Davey who suspects it is simply a myth. Do you know the sixth step?"

Evelyn blushed.

"I don't know any of the steps," she said.

"Well, it had to do with the removal of defects of character. It bothered me considerably because I was always assuming defects that I didn't have. It's awful easy to feel virtuous about overcoming sins you've never been aggravated by and perhaps that was what I wanted. At a discussion meeting I heard a man say, 'If you've got a monkey on your back, get rid of it, but for Christ's sake don't put one there.' You haven't got any monkeys on your back, Evelyn. You've just got a booze problem and as long as you don't take the first drink you'll be all right."

"I haven't been a saint," she said. "If I didn't have Robert, I'd look for another man."

"Of course you would, and quite rightly. But you do have him so forget about it."

"We're throwing a party for some big-shot insurance men," Evelyn said. "Robert wasn't very keen about it but it's one of those things you have to do to get ahead."

"Yes," Martin said tonelessly.

"He delayed it a long time because of me."

Martin did not respond.

"You look sad so suddenly," she said.

"Oh——" he said vaguely, shrugging.

"I'll be all right. I'm never tempted."

Martin smiled and moved to stand up.

"Don't worry about me."

"I won't, Evelyn," he said.

She rose with him and walked to the street, taking his arm. Outside she hugged him again and kissed him, laughing at his embarrassment.

"But I love you, Martin," she said. "You're my brother. I never had a brother."

"I just don't feel like a brother when you do that," he said, grinning.

He was holding her hand now and his face became pensive as she looked at him.

"Be careful, Evelyn," he said. "I'll see you Wednesday."

"Good-bye, Martin."

He looked so lonely walking away that she wanted to run after him and console him some way.

## XXVI

IT CANNOT be merely a nostrum. Martin thought, as he read the steps over again. How can it be when so many have recovered? Nor could sobriety be a Pyrrhic victory. He was so imbued with scepticism that he found it necessary every now and then to reassure himself. It was, of course, the word *God* that disturbed him, or, more to the point, that he had to use the same word that the believer in an anthropomorphic deity used. Then, too, he was afraid that he would have to abandon —betray was the word that entered his mind—the liberal tradition and imagination that had offered him his judicial standards and his hope for the greater part of his life. His own alcoholism, he had sometimes thought, was symptomatic of the liberal decay. I'd rather be dead than orthodox, he thought, whether the orthodoxy is ecclesiastical, political, social, or psychiatric. Orthodoxy first distorted the original shape and then uncompromisingly froze it. The orthodox were not pure; they were just inflexible.

For this Martin confined his own prayers to a simple expression of gratitude or for the joyful acceptance of God's will. And even this

last, he had to recognize, was not completely devoid of nonsense since it was obvious that he would attain a joyful acceptance only if it was God's will. He was continually aware of the parallel aspects of ignorance and faith and so he sought the cleansing quality of the act. At meetings he always helped to arrange the chairs or clean up in the kitchen. He would pass the collection basket and offer rides to people. The only thing he refused to do was speak, except at jails and asylums, where he was unknown and felt that his own childhood helped him to understand the peculiar nature of institutional life. Dick and Tom had asked him to speak again and were disappointed, but they understood why he did not want to. First was the remembrance of his drunk and the knowledge that some of his listeners would be aware of it. However, he would have suffered this humiliation if he had sincerely believed his speaking would have helped someone. He felt he had nothing to offer the member who had been sober longer than he and that his thinking was too involved to be of aid to the new member who was sweating and shaking and was looking only for a way out of his immediate trouble. It was in the sphere of personal relationships that he felt his effort had to fall. Before or after the meeting he approached the person standing alone, with a smile and a few words. He became adept at quickly opening up a channel of intimacy that allowed the grateful relief of outspoken admission of trouble and failure. His immediate sympathy sounded in his voice and it was not the sympathy of the fortunate for the unfortunate but an honest sharing of a common affliction. His influence was calming, reassuring, and his listeners tended to leave him with a deeper awareness of their own strength and a new sense of the exciting possibilities of friendship that extended beyond the usual amenities, that could be accepted at once without qualification because it was completely undemanding and so entirely free from any taint of the condemnation to which they had been accustomed.

Martin was present one evening at a meeting attended by two alcoholic priests who had been sober for a number of years. They were red-faced Irishmen on whom the imprint of indulgence would probably always remain, traced by tiny broken veins and brought into relief by pouched flesh, enlarged noses, and jowls that sagged emptily. It was astonishing in all that malformed facial geography to find their eyes clear, penetrating, and kindly. Lingered near to eavesdrop and observe when the meeting ended, Martin found that, like himself, they offered sympathy and encouragement and were embarrassed by requests for advice.

"I don't know any more about alcohol than you," one of them remarked. "I have to come here to learn. I try to recognize parts of myself in the speakers. Like them I became a drunk not because I wanted to but because at some period and for some reason I became powerless over alcohol. The wee drop became a wide stream, and perhaps it was my spiritual pride that for so long kept me from admitting so simple a fact that I just couldn't handle booze. The problem of drinking is not a problem to me as a priest so much but as a man and as an alcoholic like all these others." The priest grinned suddenly. "I will say, though, that since coming to AA I think my understanding of people has widened a bit. I've had to sit with the sinners, so to speak, and now I'm not quite so ready to jump down the throats of my parishioners."

But Martin knew that though the priest reduced his alcoholism to this easily recognized level, he must have suffered spiritual torment and fear more intensely than he would have as a layman.

"We all, of course, suffer from fears and remorse and the damage of broken resolution," the priest said quietly.

He meant to imply that he was not different from other alcoholics, that in this he had no secret strength or knowledge that spared him. The priest's humility was the more genuine in that he was loath or unable to express it adequately and took refuge in this casual manner of speaking.

I believe always in man, Martin thought as he stepped away, and doubt always his organizations.

"Are you doing your penance?" Abbie asked one evening as he was leaving for an asylum meeting.

Perhaps it was. Perhaps it was no more than a shedding of guilt and a subsequent relief at absolution. But he did not want to use those terms. A certain impatience with all terms often aggravated him and sometimes his continual reading was spurred on by a longing for some radical, pristine interpretation that would galvanize his life. The thoughts of men are old and worn, he would think. But then he would accuse himself of seeking the quick, the easy way out, as he had with booze. My soul is still saturated, he would remark. I have not as yet experienced full acceptance. He had come down from the jagged emotional peaks of his stay at Greenleaf Hill and now had to live with impurities of life once more.

"Where do you get such ideas?" he asked Abbie.

"From you and your books," she said.

She could look at him steadily now and even sometimes with a hint of gentle raillery that confused him pleasantly. She had been

working for several weeks and her strength, both mental and physical, had increased. He noticed that she always wore stockings now and that the dresses she had acquired on instalment in the shop where she worked, fitted her in such a manner that her form was revealed. Before, she had dressed slovenly and shapelessly and the thought that her body might be attractive had not entered his mind. Sometimes, if they sat together in the evening, he surreptitiously studied her for minutes at a time. The light beneath which she read burnished her short dark hair and flowed around the clean white column of her neck. He could not resist going to her and placing his hand on her head and then letting his finger tips run down her neck to her shoulder. She looked up with wide expectant eyes.

"Is it so much different, Abbie?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she said, lowering her head before his gaze.

She was reading the blue book of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, a discussion of the twelve steps and traditions. He wondered if it was something she had read there that had caused her to start repaying him money. For the last two weeks he had found an envelope containing ten dollars on the kitchen table. The envelope had been addressed simply, "For Martin," and had held no explanatory note. She no longer slept at his house though she might remain in the evening till he returned from a meeting if he went alone. The shop she worked in was on Main Street in Deering and she had moved to a room uptown. Possibly to be farther away from her old haunts in Lynn, he thought. He did not question her moves as he might have done the first few weeks after Greenleaf. He was happy to see her assuming her own decisions and standards and sometimes he was delighted by a girlish spontaneity breaking through the grave reserve that had settled on her.

On the evening that Abbie mentioned penance Martin went with three other members of the Deering group to a state asylum. Though it was dark, the daytime sight of the buildings was in his mind, great masses of old red brick towering from the hilltop, forbidding, scarring the sky obscenely. The word *penance* remained in his mind and became associated with punishment. But penance was the voluntary acceptance of punishment, not this growing infliction of insanity upon the age, the constant and horrible compression of man into a few accepted shapes, extruded or moulded like so many plastic items for the cheap counters of civilization, the increasing rejects, cracked or improperly tempered, cast in bins upon these hills. Oh God, I can't take on the conscience of an age, he thought.



I am an alcoholic, not a prophet. I can exist only within the limitations of a few personal relationships and offer for what it's worth a few words of hope and encouragement.

The meeting was held in the employees' dining-room to make attendance more a matter of choice. Dick acted as chairman, his rosy face by turns clownish and humble.

"Chums," he said, "I once did a term in one of these palatial institutions but my nature was more suited to county jails. Well, what the hell, it's all in the past now. I learned how to stay sober. But I'll tell you how I managed to get committed instead of juggled that one time. I was on the wagon for three months. I was in dead earnest. I thought I had the booze problem licked, but of course I was unhappy and I fell off. This time it was worse than ever. One morning I'm sick and broke and back where I'd sworn I'd never be again. I thought I'd end it all for good. I can't swim. I was by these rocks about eight feet above the water at the beach. I took a running leap and sailed through the air as graceful as a big-ass bird. Christ," he said with weary disgust, "the water was only up to my waist. I came walking out fully clothed and in my wrong mind and a cop nailed me."

Some of the patients laughed politely, others boisterously. Martin laughed, restrained himself, and broke out in snickers after Dick had started to talk again. Dick stopped and looked at him with a grin of pleasure at his appreciation. Across the long table at which they were sitting a girl now started laughing again. Martin looked at her. It was Alice Fainchild--the girl who had been carried out from Greenleaf Hill after her attack of D.T.'s. When sandwiches and coffee were served Martin moved around the table to sit by her. She was quite pretty except for the faint uncertainty that was in her expression.

"Your name is Alice, isn't it?" he asked.

"How did you know?"

"I was at Greenleaf when you came there."

"En," she said. "I don't remember any of that except riding there and then the men with the knives. I must have been in very bad shape."

"Yes. We were all broken up to see you taken away."

"I've been here ever since. I'm being discharged in a few days."

"Has it helped you any?"

"It's scared the wits out of me. I was afraid they would never let me go. I didn't learn the routine right away. I couldn't eat the food even though I was hungry. I didn't know this was reported against

me till one of the keepers told me. Then I would eat it all and get to a bathroom quickly so I could throw it up without anyone knowing. After a week or so I managed to keep it down and then I found I was sitting beside a glutton who would eat everything I gave her. I've been living on peanuts and chocolate bars from the vending machines mostly."

She fell silent and then said, "It's quite horrible, you know."

"Yes," he said.

"Then it was reported I didn't mix with anyone. I was in among all kinds of psychotics. How could I mix? They frightened me. Then I was afraid I would get shock treatments, so I had to fake laughing and being cheerful and that made it worse. I suppose then I was credited with hysteria. The psychiatrist asked a lot of questions and not knowing how he would interpret my answers I tried to think of what was most normal. Fortunately they're over-worked and don't seem to get really interested unless they dig out something bizarre."

"You'll be out in a few days. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going home first but I think my father and mother are going to ask me to live by myself. I don't blame them, really."

"Will you go to meetings?"

"I guess so."

"You'll have to have a job."

"Yes. I know shorthand and typing but I've never worked and it rather scares me."

Martin took out a pencil and notebook and wrote his address.

"Here," he said. "I think I can help you find something. How did you like the meeting?"

"It's the first time I felt really happy since I've been here. I learn something at the meetings. The psychiatrists and doctors know nothing about drinking. They can remember the shocks and pains of their childhood and they've had the normal illnesses but they have no basis of common experience to understand the alcoholic."

"Will you try this, Alice?" he said. "You have my address and telephone number. When you're discharged, before you have that first drink, get in touch with me. At any hour. But if you should happen to start drinking first get in touch with me anyway, as soon as possible. All right?"

"Yes. Thank you," she said.

It was a week later, on reaching home early from a visit to a factory, that Martin received a phone call from Alice. Since it was Friday, the shop where Abbie worked was open in the evening

and he had planned to dine out alone. Alice had left home. She was at the Deering railroad station.

"I'm sort of lost," she said on the phone. "I've never lived anywhere but home. I don't know where to go for a room and I'll have to find a job."

"Stay there and I'll come along in a few minutes," Martin said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. I remembered what you said."

As his car approached the station, Martin caught sight of her standing on the roofed-over waiting platform. As he stopped the car out of her line of sight he studied her. The late clear sunlight slanted beneath the shed roof and lighted her as though she was a model posed before a camera. She was dressed in a beige suit that was drawn in at the waist so that the shape of her hips was set off and one saw the starting lines of her full thighs. Her skirt was moderate in length and she wore flesh-coloured stockings and shoes of a dark brown. By her rested a suitcase and a small train case of matched leather. Her face was visible beneath the short up-turned brim of a brown hat that contrasted with her newly tinted blonde hair.

He started the car moving. He made a wide U turn, bringing the car smoothly alongside the low platform.

It was apparent that Alice was uncertain of herself. The finality of the change which had occurred in her life, the experience of the asylum and the breaking of home ties, left her course without recognizable guides. Martin sought to reassure her, assailed by a sudden lust for her.

"Maybe I should have called you before coming here," Alice said.

"No, it's quite all right. It's a good thing you arrived here without stopping on the way for a few shots."

"I've never looked for a room. I couldn't go to my friends for help, not after what happened."

"No, of course not. You're looking very well, Alice."

She hadn't had anything to drink for over sixty days now, he thought. He restrained himself from putting his hand on her waist as he opened the car door for her. He did not start the motor immediately.

"I didn't know what to do. I'm kind of lost."

"Have you any money?"

"Yes. Two hundred dollars."

"So you need to get a room somewhere and then a job. Do you feel shaky at all?"

"No," she said. "Just a little scared, being on my own."

"How old are you, Alice?" he asked.

"Twenty-six."

"Just relax. I was about to go out to eat when you called. We'll have dinner and talk things over. All right?"

He started the car and turned on the radio and without thinking headed for the highway that led to North Deering and the Captain's Hangout, a dine and dance place.

"Were you drinking long, Alice?"

"Since I was eighteen. At dances and around. I found I was getting drunk every night the last two years."

"Sure," he said.

"I was getting in at three or four in the morning and my father was always furious."

"How is it you never married?" he asked. "You're very attractive."

"I was engaged a couple of times. I don't know. I broke it off. I didn't want to be tied down and take on responsibilities. I liked too many boys. I was having too good a time and later I knew I would have to stop drinking if I married. I began hiding it and drank even in bed."

He wasn't quite listening to her responses, knowing already and facilely visualizing the details of her life. He picked out rather the implications that now lent themselves to the furtherance of his longing, her liking too many boys, her engagements, during which she would surely have been aroused, her running around late at night.

Across the table with its dim light her face was the promise of shadowed delight. The removal of her gloves, the exposure of the pale wrists and palms, fascinated him. Her stomach would be smooth and undistorted by childbirth. She had no need for a girdle. The contemplation of the imagined beauty of her body removed moral consideration and disguised his lust in a counterfeit appreciation. He was not consciously deceiving himself. Under the given circumstances his thoughts and actions were dictated as by a formula of the times.

"I'm sorry I can't offer you a drink," he said.

"Oh, I couldn't take it anyway. They put me on antabuse before I left."

"How do you feel about taking it?"

"I don't mind for a while. I've got to stay sober and find out something about myself."

The orchestra was playing and several couples were dancing. He would have liked to dance with Alice but he was at a loss to create a situation where his request would not seem out of place.

"About a job," he said. "I work in a government office in Boston. The chief administrative assistant is a personal friend. We can get you located in a section that isn't too busy till you sharpen up a bit."

"Maybe I can repay you some way."

Martin looked at her quickly but her face showed only a concerned gratitude.

"You can repay me. Let's have a dance before ordering."

"Sure," Alice said. "I haven't danced sober for years."

They danced slowly. The odour of her was softly strange. Her hair was close to his nose. He felt the softness of her body between her ribs and her hip, and an occasional tantalizing brush of her leg. Impressions, the music, the dim dance floor, the drinks on the trays of passing waitresses, gave him the illusion of having had a few drinks himself. A thought intruded itself. I shouldn't be here. I've had all this. He covered the compunction with reason. The dancing will relax her and relieve her apprehension.

"All right?" he asked.

"Oh, fine," Alice said, smiling. "I didn't expect this."

She moved closer to him and he responded with a tighter embrace.

"About the room. There's no need to look for one tonight. I don't work tomorrow and we can look then. You can stay at my house tonight."

Alice leaned back to look up at him. Even in the small gesture she seemed to assume a new centre of being with a sharpened awareness. She gazed at him for a long interval with the corners of her mouth reflecting her knowledge of his purpose.

"Aren't you married?" she asked.

"No. Why?" He feigned surprise and innocence.

"I just thought it would look strange, bringing me in."

"No, I live alone," Martin said. "There's plenty of room."

"So," she said.

"That's an ambiguous word." He wore a slight air of being offended.

"No." Alice pressed his arm. "I didn't mean it that way."

"I can call up a woman to come over and make it respectable."

"No, no. I wouldn't want to talk to anyone else."

Quite suddenly, just before the music stopped, she moved her belly close against him. It was a promise. She glanced at him with

an obscure intimacy. As he walked back to the table Martin was astonished at how quickly the unspoken proposal had been made and accepted and yet left in a state where it could be denied. Alice walked beside him holding his arm with her two hands, with the leaning, touching closeness of a lover. I'm not really married. It's been a long time since I've had a woman, he thought. This justification depressed him unaccountably, instead of relieving him. Alice excused herself to go to the rest room. He sat tapping a cigarette nervously.

Now his thoughts broke angrily against himself as though he had discovered another person in some despicable act. In the name of Christ, who am I trying to fool? I am taking advantage of her faith, her desire, her vulnerability, the way a drunk exploits the humanness of his friends. Would he have offered his aid so readily to a fat middle-aged woman? But he felt, too, almost a child's resentment that he could not have his own way with himself. In the total of happiness which life will offer me, how much is lost if I don't climb in bed with her? he questioned. He did not really know Alice. Supposing, for instance, she moved directly from passion to love? And what of Abbie?

Now he had to retread his way back to the unselfish attitude of friendship and charity, or at least to a selfishness that did not threaten others.

Alice came back to the table and quite deliberately he turned the conversation back on her predicament and told some stories that pointed up the difference in their ages and background. Discreetly he withdrew from the field of wooing with an inward grin at his fluent tiptoeing. He shook his head in sad reproof of himself. But in the car once more he noticed Alice's knees emerging from her skirt and he could smell again the arousing perfume. She sat close to him and he knew it was impossible for him to verbalize desire into charity. He needed a practical safeguard to forestall himself.

Martin carried her bags into the house, seated her in the living-room, and went into the kitchen to make coffee. He needed to be handling something, to hold a cup and saucer in an attitude of defence as once he had held a highball as a badge of venturesome confidence. How is it I get so entangled with women? he wondered. He suspected dark analytical depths within himself, a regular coalmine with burrowings in all directions and on all levels.

The door bell rang just as he handed Alice a cup. It was Ralph Hilton. He was hatless and wearing a grey topcoat, looking hand-

some and exhilarated. Martin could not restrain that peering look with which one alcoholic often questions another silently at an unexpected meeting. But Ralph was sober.

"I was walking around and saw you 'were home," he said.

"Fine. Come in."

"My wife suspects some great mental disturbance because I've taken to walks in the evening."

"I don't blame her. In the suburbs only postmen walk. You remember Alice Fairchild. She was at Greenleaf Hill briefly."

"Surely," Ralph said. "Daggers, wasn't it?"

"Long sharp ones," Alice said, smiling at him.

The wounds from them are real but invisible, Martin thought. He saw the aroused interest in Ralph as he sat opposite Alice. He saw Ralph glance down at Alice's legs as she raised her cup.

"Will you be here a little while?" Martin asked. "I want to go uptown on an errand."

Alice looked at him quickly.

"I'll be right back."

"Surely," Ralph said.

Poor Alice suspects my errand is to the drugstore, he thought. It was a little before nine o'clock. He parked his car on Main Street and strolled to the dress shop where Abbie worked. Through the uncovered double doors he saw her talking to a last customer at the rear of the store. Martin wished suddenly that he could overhear her words. An annoyance at being made to stand thus outside was mixed with a small feeling of outraged proprietorship, as a husband might resent his wife's employment by others than himself. 'Good Lord, I don't own her, he protested. But he felt an unaccountable longing to stride into the shop, seize her arm, and lead her peremptorily out, as though having discovered her on the verge of infidelity. My, oh my, he murmured to himself at the strength of his feelings. He walked back to his car in a mood of loneliness and sat in it, watching the store front anxiously. Shortly he saw the customer emerge and he left the car to stand waiting on the pavement. When Abbie came out he approached her rapidly. She was unaware of his nearness.

"Hello, Abbie," he said.

"Oh, Martin!" she cried. She seized both his hands and made a little slumping motion. "I didn't expect to see you."

"Can you come down to the house?"

"Oh, yes," she said eagerly.

"Well, there's someone there," he said hesitantly.

He held open the car door for her, then walked around and sat in the driver's seat.

"Deep plot," he said. "There's a woman at my house."

"Sober?"

"Oh, yes. Sober and nice-looking."

"That shouldn't be trouble. That should be pleasure."

"Temporarily maybe."

He told her who the woman was and how she happened to be there.

"Do you see now why I need your help?"

"No," Abbie said.

"That's not the right answer," Martin said.

He started the car and drove very slowly and was silent for a time.

"Abbie, I danced with her at dinner," he said finally.

"Did you?"

"I should have located a room for her right away instead of asking her to stay."

"Why?"

"Well," he said, embarrassed. "Abbie, will you do me a favour and sleep at my house tonight?"

"Of course, Martin," she said. "Oh hell, don't explain it," she continued rapidly.

"I started to make a play for her."

"I know."

"When she came to me for something else."

"She'd probably like that, too."

He could not be certain there was not bitterness in her voice.

"But it would be completely wrong."

"Wrong," she said.

"You're not annoyed with me, Abbie?"

"Me?" she said with frank astonishment. She was silent a moment. "Martin, I don't think I could ever, under any circumstances, be annoyed or angry with you. Only with myself. There's an empty room up where I am. If Alice would like to take it, maybe I could watch out for her for a while."

"Fine" Martin said.

As he pulled into his driveway and shut off the motor, Abbie did not move to get out.

"Martin," she said, "how different it all is. Only eight or ten weeks and everything's changed."

"Yes," he said quietly.



Martin led her down the driveway and around to the front door. He walked with his arm about Abbie's waist.

"I must have been dead all those years," Abbie said. "Sometimes now I'm lonely and angry but I don't take a drink to kill it. I tried to kill everything I didn't like and when I grew to hate myself I tried that, too. But you were there."

Abbie shivered slightly.

"It's not the memory. I'm cold," she said. "But it feels good even to be cold."

In the house Martin watched her as she sat down close to Alice, took one of her hands, and began talking to her. Ralph wandered into the kitchen when Martin went to make some more coffee.

"Nice girl," he said.

Martin took coffee to the women and returned.

"Sit down, Ralph," he said. "How are you doing?"

"With booze, all right. With my wife, not so good. Some day it's going to blow up. I know a change should be made but what to do I don't know."

"Maybe you will eventually."

"If you have a lot of money it's easy. Divorce isn't for the poor, even if I felt that was what I wanted."

"Is your wife still forcing a period of atonement?"

Ralph smiled sadly. "I'm afraid it's going to be permanent. There are some new sacrifices I should make. If I really loved my family, I'd give up smoking so we could put the one hundred dollars away every year for the girls' college education. If I really loved the family I'd take a job nights because I don't do any hard work during the day. Some friend's husband makes extra money tending a store each evening, so I should. Well, I'm sober anyway. Dick and Tom asked me if I'd like to say something at the next meeting."

"Do you feel like speaking?"

"I don't know. I don't know if I have anything to say yet."

"Don't speak then. Wait till you feel right."

"I'd like to go up to my camp for a weekend alone," Ralph said. "I've never done that. Just to fish a little and row and walk around. But, oh Lord, what a holler would go up. Wasting money, depriving the family, selfish, the children need clothes. But all it would cost would be the gas money and a couple of dollars for food that I'd eat at home anyway."

"Does it take you long to drive up there?"

"Two hours."

"Look, go home and get a sleep and get up early and take off."

Leave a note saying where you're going. We put a lot of stress on tolerance and kindness but antagonisms are part of living and have to be faced. Don't mistake indecision for virtue. There are times when you have to wound people. Do it, but don't do it vindictively. Don't wound yourself at the same time. Saints and mystics can escape the occasional necessity of hurting others, but not a suburban husband and father living in a world of tight social pressures."

"Ah," Ralph said sceptically. "It's not worth it. It's bad enough now."

"So——" Martin said. "Let's go inside."

"Alice is going to look at that room up where I am," Abbie said.

They were sitting side by side and Martin smiled at them. Already they looked like conspirators. Abbie would see in Alice the reflection of herself some five years back as he often saw parts of himself in Ralph. When Alice became too exhilarated or depressed, when her reactions began to show a ragged evasiveness and deception crept into her acts, even though the acts were inconsequential in themselves, then Abbie would know Alice had reached a state of danger and would be able to guide her past the time of threat.

He thought of this, but foremost in him was a deep affection for the two women, or perhaps rather a wide affection, somehow both brotherly and paternal and yet again present only because they were women and he was a man. Our analytical age has made us suspicious of the variegated aspects of our love, he thought, and so has tended to prune its full growth.

When he rose again to go to the kitchen, Alice followed him out. She looked up at him, standing close, and then down at the cup in her hands.

"This is nice," she said. "To be with you people and talk like this. I'm very grateful, Martin. I wish there was something I could do."

She looked at him squarely now and it seemed unmistakable to him that she was offering herself. A wild flurry of desire shook him. He could not bear the nearness of her breasts and her unlifted face. And yet, would she not be happy to receive him? Would it not restore her confidence to find a lover so soon? He would be gentle and kind. He turned away from her to the stove. To waken in the morning with her warm form curled against him.

"There's nothing to do, Alice," he said. "We stay sober and try to help each other, that's all. It's no good clutching at a brief happiness that might linger destructively. It's our old fault of looking for the quick cure."

Ralph entered the kitchen with his coat on.

"I'm leaving, Martin," he said. "I hope I see you again, Alice. Be good."

Then Abbie came out. She entered the kitchen hesitantly and looked at Martin with an expression at once apologetic and fearful, with something of the silent grief of a child, and Martin saw the uncertain ghosts of her past weighing her shoulders down, making this moment heavy with the fatigue of false hope and effort, with the threat to her whole timorous grasp at a new faith apparent in the sadness slanting her eyes and in the bend of her neck as she looked away. A frantic protest seized him, that she should be subject to such awful doubt. He went to her and put her head on his shoulder and hugged her gently, rubbing his cheek against her hair.

"Ah, my little Abbie," he said. "You're tired from the long day's work. You should be asleep. Are you discouraged? There's nothing to worry over. Can you and Alice sleep together? You can show her the bathroom and put out the lights down here."

He raised her head and looked into her eyes.

"All right?" he said, questioning more than these arrangements. She nodded. "Sure? Call me in the morning and we'll all have breakfast together and then I'll drive you to work and take Alice to the rooming house."

He pressed her tighter a moment and then released her.

"Good night, Alice. I'll see you in the morning."

As he looked back at her Abbie smiled in a soft happiness. In the bathroom he noticed the pint of whisky, still untouched, as he reached for some tooth paste. He took it out. There's no use leaving that staring at Alice, he thought. He crossed the hall intending to put it in his own room but then he stopped and stood there foolishly indecisive, as if hoping the pint would take care of itself. Not in my room, either, he thought. It was the old question of where to hide the bottle and the answer came to him: In the women's room where they wouldn't be aware of it and he couldn't get it. He did not know why he was afraid of the bottle at this moment. He just did not want it available.

## XXVII

THE insects of fear were continually stinging him and sometimes the infection would swell to a small lump of dread before David was consciously aware of it. Even in the daytime—for the bar and cocktail lounge were closed with heavy drapes against the bright sun—the shadows along the walls and in the far corners were the script of fear, black yet indistinct, the lines refusing to assume a form that he could apprehend.

He was most contented approaching sleep and departing from it and as the days passed he slept later in the morning and stayed longer in bed after awakening, trying to prolong the delicious separation from responsibility and people. Sometimes he would hold Helen in bed for an hour after he was awake, fondling her as one might a pet, yawning, stretching, dozing once more, mumbling unimportant words, and staring at the lines cut from the sun by the Venetian blinds. It was an effort to leave the swaddling warmth of the bed. He was like a boy whiling away a summer afternoon lying on some hillside.

Helen was aware vaguely that his manhood was draining away, but she was herself an alcoholic and the aimless existence to which they had settled did not arouse her antipathy to a point where she protested with any great firmness. Lying in bed with David she translated sloth into love.

"Why get churned up about things?" she said. Her physical energy remained low. She achieved serenity by procrastination.

Martin came up with Abbie one Saturday night and they sat in the lounge drinking ginger ale. David brought over a number of regular customers to introduce to him. His eyes were alight with admiration. It was as if he was showing off a big brother who had performed some heroic act. He was pleased, too, that Abbie was with Martin, for she was smartly dressed and carried herself with a quiet dignity that was worthy of him. At every opportunity he came from behind the bar and stood looking down at Martin with a love he could not conceal, and when the bar closed he sat down to talk and confide the details of his job. But as they were leaving the lounge Martin gazed at David rather sadly.

"It's not enough, Davey," he said. "It's too narrow. Go to some meetings, Davey, will you?"

"Ah, don't worry about me. I'm all right," he said.

"If you could find a pigeon to take care of- —"

"I'd probably get drunk with him. Wait a year, Martin. Wait till I'm dry a year."

In the lobby they met the manager, and David, with a slight sense of outrage, was forced to introduce Martin.

"Did you enjoy your drinks?" the manager asked.

"Wonderful," Martin said with weight and finality. "Absolutely wonderful. David has an incredible knack with a Martini, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes. Yes," the manager said, puzzled and surprised at Martin's fervour.

Behind him Abbie and Helen restrained their laughter.

On the Monday following Martin's visit the manager had David take down all the bottles from the shelves and then he personally rearranged them, supposedly in a more harmonious manner. He instructed David to maintain the new arrangement. In the late afternoon, when he was rushed by a sales meeting breaking up, David got confused and nervous reaching for bottles whose location had been changed. When he went home to the trailer for supper he found Helen lying on the studio couch. At first he thought that she had been drinking and a feeling of relief came over him in the quick knowledge that now he would be able to take one himself. But Helen had been crying.

"There's a letter from my mother," she said. "She's gone to Florida for the winter, taking Douglas with her. The bitch. She wouldn't tell me ahead of time, knowing that I might stop it."

"Aw, what's the use?" David answered, sitting down heavily.

"I haven't got any supper ready."

"I'm not hungry. I'll have a cup of coffee."

He sat there a moment, staring with an air of exhaustion at the floor, then he pounded his fist in his palm in sudden anger.

"Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!" he cried. "What can you do? How can you get out from under the bastards?"

Helen looked up in alarm.

"Take it easy, Davey," she said.

"If I knew something! Christ, even if I knew enough to be a machinist or a carpenter or a plumber. What do I know? A bartender. A cab driver. Things a kid can do coming out of the eighth grade. So what have I to stand on? Staying sober? Something no-

body even knows I'm having any difficulty doing? Nothing, it's all nothing. A bag of marbles. But even in that little place I am, behind the bar, can they let you alone to decide for yourself?"

"You better lie down and take a rest before you go back," Helen said.

"Oh, to hell with it. I'll ride around a while and cool off."

When he returned to work, the cocktail lounge and the bar were empty. He walked back and forth, running his hand along the edge of the bar, vaguely afraid of the quietness, of the cavernous corners, of unmarked time. He looked at himself in the mirror, in a V-shaped space between a fifth of Old Grandad and a bottle of Metaxas Brandy, pulling at his chin, stretching the skin taut as one does shaving and turning his head with his hand as a barber might. What was there? Curly black hair, blue eyes, full lips with a crooked curve, a face, a head. He still looked a good deal like a prep-school boy and the blandness of his face always surprised him. He felt it should be deeply etched by his experience.

Booze, he thought, bottles. He was suddenly quite calm, as though he had reached the apex of sobriety. He turned his back to the bar once more to survey the serried fifths and quarts. Anti-aircraft guns, shooting corks. Shooting corks at coloured balloons.

Quite deliberately now he reached for a bottle of bourbon, one that had not been tampered with, though he was not cognizant of the purpose of this selection, and he poured out a drink. It sat in isolation on the expanse of the varnished bar. He returned the bottle to the shelf. There was the drink below him, one ounce of whisky, unrelated to him but which he could handle and dispense with as he chose. The certainty and strength he had always longed for seemed at this moment secure. Even if he chose to drink it, he could stand separated and related to the act only as a spectator. He lifted the glass and swallowed the whisky. With an old bygone gesture he reached without looking and lifted the bottle of bourbon once more. One ounce would prove nothing. He poured another drink, gulped it, and returned the bottle to the shelf. Now. He would feel the two drinks and hold himself apart from the very sensation of his own body.

Some customers came in and the evening's work started. He became quite busy and the consciousness of his newly found integrity subsided. But the rush tapered off about nine-thirty, an unusual time for slackening. He looked through the cocktail lounge at the clientele, middle-class people, small businessmen, salesmen, one or

two state politicians. And their women, flushed and laughing or tight-mouthed because their husbands had ordered another drink. He did not even feel the two drinks he had had. He did not feel like drinking any more. What was in it? Nothing. He looked down with a sense of superiority on these people fiddling around for pleasure, sipping at the edge of life. I've had it. I was back there where they are. A feeling of strength returned to him and with a shrug he returned behind the bar. On the way he put a nickel in the juke box and punched the button for an old Artie Shaw recording that had been revived.

He was straightening up from rinsing some glasses when he saw the face staring at him. It was a square, red face with a mouth a little full from ill-fitting false teeth. The eyes were a weak blue, narrowed from intent squinting. The hair was close-cropped grey with some yellowish mixture. The nose twitched as though unsettling a fly and then the face fell back into its open, expressionless stare once more. The mouth opened as the owner raised a glass of beer. David took a deep breath, held it, and then exhaled slowly. He turned his back to the bar to put some stem glasses on a shelf. When he turned around the man was still examining him. He wore dark, poorly pressed serge and an ordinary white shirt with a black tie. When he rose slowly to approach the bar David began quivering.

"What's your name?" the stranger asked.

David shrugged, smiled, and pointed to the lettering on his pink shirt.

"I mean your last name."

"Hutchison," David said.

"Funny. You look familiar. Ever been around Boston?"

"Only for a weekend now and then to see a show. Why?"

"Thought I knew you."

"I'm from Manchester originally," David said. "Maybe there?"

"No, not there," the stranger said slowly. He returned to his seat and resumed his staring.

During the afternoon of the third day the phone on the bar rang and he was surprised to hear Helen's voice.

"Listen carefully," she said. "I'm at the corner petrol station. Go down in the lobby and call me here from the phone booth right away."

He understood immediately that she was afraid the motel switchboard operator would listen in. There were only two customers in the lounge. He told the waitress he would be gone several minutes.

Christ, what was it now? The face of the stranger. Something. Helen wouldn't have called. He dialled the petrol station.

"There's a detective from the Boston police at the trailer," Helen said.

"What did he say?"

"He asked for you and I told him you were out shopping downtown. He said he would wait. Then I said I had to look at a baby I was minding in another trailer and I would be right back."

Almost perversely a calmness settled on him, uncertainty finally resolved, the rules and moves being established, even the fear that shook him was only a factor. He was detached.

"How did he know my name or where we lived?"

"Greenleaf Hill? If he knew you were from Lynn he could trace it easy. But why? He let me get out of the trailer awfully easy. Maybe he wanted to look around."

"What would he find? What would he be looking for?"

"The point is, Davey, you can't afford to be talked to by the Boston police no matter what it's for."

"Yeah, I know. Listen. I'm going to leave work now and go down to Martin's house. Call me there in the evening. Try to find out what it's about. All right?"

"Take it easy, Davey," she said.

"Don't worry. Be good," he answered.

David saw the manager standing by the magazine rack, turning the pages of *Look*.

"Something personal has come up," he said. "I'll have to leave immediately for the rest of the day."

"Something personal?" the manager said. "I haven't got anyone to put on right now. Everybody in the kitchen is busy."

"The place is almost empty. Anyone will do."

"I don't like anyone there." He stressed the anyone. "Is someone ill? What is it?"

"Something personal, that's all"

"I'm sorry. You'll have to stand by till I locate someone. It may take several hours," the manager said.

"I'm sorry. I'm leaving now," David said.

"Well, then, don't bother coming back."

"All right. I'll stop in at the liquor commission and have a man sent down to fill the bottles for you."

The manager looked at him with open contempt.

"Someone who is quick on the slips and register," David said. "Did you know I've kept a record of every bottle that's been re-



ceived. It would be interesting to compare my list with what the motel was billed. You and I, you know, are shovelling in the same hole. I'll be in tomorrow."

It was his first victory over the manager. He walked away momentarily forgetting the purpose of his leaving. With a flush of triumph he hurried lightly back to the bar to check the register before going.

He wore a light grey topcoat and his dark curly head rose from the short upturned collar in the open-faced innocence and eagerness of a young salesman. His step had the spring of happily suppressed energy. As he went across the wide parking area he looked back at the winged motel, turned, and walking back a few steps saw it now with the objectivity of an appraiser and then the detached glance of a traveller who had stayed briefly. The quick response of his car delighted him as he wheeled it around and came out on to the highway. He turned on the radio, relaxed, and let the car run along moderately. There was no particular need for hurry now. Martin wouldn't be home from work till nearly six. The sun came out brilliantly from behind a cloud and lighted the flat early-winter countryside. The occasional white cottages looked warm, secure, and joyful. The dark spruce and pine were quietly strong and brave. If I could hold it, if I could hold it, he thought. Hold it till spring.

But the moment was shaken by a state police car that drew up alongside of him. The driver looked at David as he maintained an equal speed, then he accelerated and passed on. What is he looking for? Why me? The unaccountable fear arose in a sour, sick remembrance of wrong, not the particular wrong of the broken probation but the wrong of his whole life, the victimizing wrong that had shrouded him even as a child. The quivering returned and his mind burrowed in ferret-like reasoning. Was he smart in heading towards Massachusetts? Should he wait till it was dark? Had Helen's mother somehow heard of the probation and reported him before leaving for Florida? His father? But his father wasn't even concerned. One way or another his father would not be bothered. Nothing could disturb his petty politics. It had to be the probation. What else could it be? And now the possibility of imprisonment struck him acutely, the grey line and the closing door and the foot-step down the corridor, the sight and sound and pervading smell of dread and fear. There would be nothing that could ward it off, neither Helen nor Martin nor drink nor laughter. But he was married, he was sober, he had a job. Weren't those factors a can-

cellation of the broken probation? Would Massachusetts have to apply for extradition? Why should the state hound him? I am nothing. It wasn't worth the state's expense. They wouldn't go to the expense if they knew where I was.

Suddenly David jammed on the brakes and pulled off on the shoulder on the road. He got out quickly, took off his topcoat, and reached into the back seat for a white turtle-necked sweater that he pulled on over his pink shirt. He donned his topcoat again, got back into the car, and drove off. Once over the state line he slowed down. He would have to kill a little time. Kill a little time, his mind repeated. He looked ahead on either side of the highway at the signs of gas stations, roadside markets, restaurants, and ice-cream stands, searching for a place to stop. There. Narragansett Beer and Ale, Liquors, Steak, Chicken. The two drinks hadn't hurt him. Remember, look down on it. And even so, I've earned something to still the nerves. Even so, Martin would not condemn him. He could go to bed at Martin's house and Helen would call but she need not know and the detective would be looking for something else, not him but something that he knew from the past, and he could get up early and be back in time for work. What's the problem, hey, what's the problem. anyway?

He walked into the bar and restaurant and sat down in a booth and noted with amusement that the table actually was covered with a white linen cloth though the place was a little dirty and obviously sold more beer than booze. He smiled at the waitress and ran his fingers through his hair.

"I'll have a bourbon and water," he said.

"What brand?"

"Old Overholt."

"That's rye."

"Oh, is it?" he asked innocently. "Then bring me Old Crow. A double."

## XXVIII

THERE were three ideas that Abbie assimilated almost immediately after her abortion: that she did not have to drink, that she could stay permanently sober, and that it was possible to be happy sober.

The desire to stay sober had been given to her by Martin, the faith in achievement by such AA speakers as the strip-teaser. More than this she realized that the shape of her life could be her own and that with continuing sobriety the unmanageable desire that had driven her in a will-less fury from one sensation to another could be controlled. She was one of those fortunate alcoholics who, at some point in their lives, know simply and completely that they are alcoholics and will remain alcoholics, and who without equivocation accept their lot.

She was not given to retrospection and she found herself living almost completely in the present. None of her decisions or acts had emotional precedence. The cleavage was clean and complete and she experienced a kind of merciful amnesia that, for the time being, guarded her growth. She felt no ill effects from the abortion. Indeed, it was from that day that her health began to improve rapidly so that she found herself, one morning a week later, leaving her room and walking rapidly down the street in happy anticipation of breakfast. In a diner the smell of coffee entranced her and she sat on a stool drinking it with deep satisfaction and smoking a cigarette as if for the first time after a long abstinence.

The ad for the job was in a Boston paper she was reading one noontime in the diner. She folded the paper immediately and sought out the store. That it was within a short walk of her room seemed miraculously fortunate. The shop employed only three women. The pay was forty dollars a week. The small amount of money seemed unimportant to Abbie yet she did not want to arouse suspicions by seeming desperate. She lied readily and harmlessly.

"I'm divorced," she said. "I have a small income."

The owner, a Mrs. Kershoff, a short, dumpy woman, studied Abbie's face and shape.

"You'll have to wear our things," she said.

"I can't afford anything right now," Abbie answered.

"All right, dear. I'll take it out of your pay a little each week, three dollars a time. Now you pick out two dresses. Come, I'll help you."

Abbie carried the dresses to her room and put one on.

She wore the dress to a meeting that night. A woman who was obviously new, who was shaking and whose face was battered by dissipation, approached her.

"Do you come with your husband?" she asked.

"No. Alone," Abbie answered.

"Well, you're not an alcoholic, are you?"

Abbie smiled and put her arm about the woman.

"That's the nicest compliment I've had for years," she said.

And then the new woman poured out a tale of impending divorce, loss of her children, illness, wasted money, blackouts, fights. It made Abbie feel almost guilty because of her own happiness. The new woman wanted some magic word that would clear all the wreckage away in one great wave of enlightenment. How did one explain the living of one day at a time?

"Just go one day without one drink," Abbie said, as she had heard so many others say. "A day is complete. You wake up, you do your work, whatever it is, go along, and the day ends. And each day you are a little healthier and the happiness grows and the problems are solved. You've got only the one day. Don't worry about the past. It's over the way a storm ends. Make the one day complete. At the end of the day you've done what you could. Go to sleep glad that you're sober. Things will come to you. All of us have been in the same mess. I've been dry only a short time."

The job was extraordinarily simple: helping customers to select dresses and try them on and sealing the purchase with flattery. She had a knack of picking just the right garment for the short, fat women and the thin, energetic girls, for the homely on whom pronounced styles looked like insults. She developed a little trick of having the customer try on two or three dresses that fitted poorly or were of the wrong colour so that when she had the customer don the dress or suit she had known immediately was the right one, the sale was assured. The customer looked at herself with a pleased astonishment, intensified by the prior disappointment. Mrs. Kershoff beamed approval as Abbie walked to the door with the customer and bade her good-bye.

"Smart, smart," Mrs. Kershoff nodded. "I've been watching. The little tricks, eh? And all the way to the door, too?"

Abbie grinned at her. They had grown quickly to like each other and to relax in an easy familiarity.

"It's just to make them pleased and happy," she said.

At half-past twelve Abbie went to lunch. The diner was noisy and friendly. She generally met Dick of the Deering Group. He worked as a meat buyer and butcher in a nearby supermarket. He came in loud-voiced, clad in a white coat flecked with blood stains, fiddling always with his hearing aid.

"Hi, hi!" he shouted on entering. "Hi, Abbie! How's the dress business? What's on the menu?" he bawled out to the counterwoman. "What's the speciality of the house?"

On being informed it was pot roast of beef, he groaned loudly, asked for a hamburger, and slid into a seat across the table from Abbie. Then gently and softly he asked, "How does it go, Abbie?"

"Fine," she said.

"God, you're looking good." His voice rose. "I'm having the Chamber of Commerce elect you Miss Supermarket of 1954."

"Are you sleeping all right?" he asked, dropping to his low register again. "Don't let anything worry you. The job going good? What do you know now, to be really hungry, hey? These other people don't know what a treat it is just to be able to eat. I saw you down at the Marblehead meeting Sunday night with Martin."

It was the warm sense of belonging. She let herself relax completely, smoking over her coffee, listening to Dick, to the clatter and the multitudinous voices, feeling the movement and the sound lapping in soft waves against her.

"I'm chairman next week," Dick said. "How about saying a few words for me?"

"Oh, I couldn't!" she exclaimed, startled out of her peace.

"You don't have to give a biography," Dick said. "Just a couple of minutes. Everyone will know it's your first time. I'll mention it. You know it's good to have a good-looking woman speak sometimes. It helps. It helps the poor woman who is still kind of beaten up. Gives her hope and confidence. Well, let me know before the meeting starts. If you don't feel up to it, it's all right, Abbie. Sometimes, though, the one you help most is yourself."

She could do this. It wasn't much to do for all that had been done for her. Even if she shook and trembled and stuttered only a sentence, even if the waves of humiliation drowned her brain. You take a little out, you put a little in.

"All right, Dick," she said. "I won't be able to say much. Don't tell Martin you're calling on me. He might worry about it."

"That's my girl. Look, don't try to make a speech. Just say what you feel at the time." He raised his voice from a conspiratorial level to include the public. "Name of God, where's my hamburger? Things were better than this under the Truman administration."

It was the weekend before she was to speak at the meeting that Alice Fairchild appeared.

"My, such beauties I'm having for guests," the landlady said. "Really, I hope no one thinks I'm in the call-house business."

She knew nothing of Abbie's alcoholism, believing only that she was a divorcee who was earning her own living. Like most rooming-house landladies her pleasures were vicarious. She looked at Alice

with a great anticipation, foreseeing tales of boy friends and an eventual marriage, perhaps even a precursory pregnancy.

"Does Mr. Gray collect you like postage stamps?" she asked Abbie.

"Alice is from Springfield," Abbie said. "Mr. Gray has known her family for years. She is going to work in Mr. Gray's office in town."

This explanation sounded wonderfully plausible and respectable.

"How you can tell stories," Alice said afterward.

Abbie smiled. "I've had a lot of practice. But isn't it strange that after getting sober and living decently the needs for lies continues? It didn't do any harm. You can't go around saying, I'm an alcoholic and I ain't got no place to live."

She made her face forlorn and begging and Alice laughed.

"I'll have to ask Martin about lies," Abbie said. "He'll give us a long discourse on them."

Alice turned away. "You shouldn't make fun of him," she said.

"Make fun of him!" Abbie exclaimed. She looked at Alice's back, the neat blonde hair-do, the fine suit, the sheer stockings, her shape. "Alice," she said softly, "I owe practically everything I have to him. How could I ridicule him? I love him."

It was better that she should know immediately.

"Oh, I didn't know," Alice said. "You didn't seem like lovers."

"We're not lovers. There's nothing between us, Alice. Maybe there never will be. Anyway, let's drop it. Will you be all right? I have to work till five. I'll be right back then and we can have supper together. Are you shaky at all?"

Abbie went to her and put her arm around her.

"I've been through it all, Alice. In the hospital four times, drunk in a hundred motels, shivering and afraid, the terrible, terrible loneliness. All I can say now is that each day is easier and happier. So don't get bored and go looking for happiness. It will come to you."

"All right," Alice said.

"Good. And if you get a little lonesome, walk around to the shop. Maybe I won't be busy and we can talk a little and look at the dresses."

Suddenly Alice turned and hugged her frantically and began weeping.

"Oh God, I feel so lost," she moaned. "Shut off from everything. Why did it have to happen to me?"

The coming of Alice increased her world, for she had someone

to whom to offer help. It was in the nature of relief to be able to use some of the love stored in her. They tried on each other's things and advised one another about make-up. A week after going to work Alice was asked out by a man in the office.

"What will I do now?" Alice asked. "We're going to a dine and dance place and he'll expect me to drink with him."

"Just tell him you don't drink," Abbie said.

"And then he says, Why? And I say, Because. And he says, Because why? What the hell do you say?" Alice asked in comic despair.

"Oh, say there's been too much of it in your family. That's no lie. Hint at some great tragedy. Then he'll be chastened and his heart will melt at your lonely courage."

"I can do something else to make him forget about drinking," Alice said.

"Now don't go getting careless," Abbie cautioned. "He'll probably try to have you and maybe he will, but don't get careless."

"No, Mamma," Alice said.

"You look lovely. He'll be proud just to be with you, without your drinking. Have a nice time, Alice."

"I wish you and Martin were coming," Alice said. "I hope my skeletons don't show. Three weeks out of the cracker factory, imagine."

Abbie was happy to learn the next morning that Alice had gotten in without having had a drink. She hadn't fallen asleep till late, a little worried, knowing that she herself, at Alice's age, would have succumbed and would have wound up the night in a motel.

Thirty-five or forty people were present the night Abbie spoke. Evelyn, Ralph, and Alice were sitting together near the front and she and Martin had seated themselves in the last row of the folding seats.

Dick said, "We have a new speaker tonight who will say a few words. It's her first time. Abbie, will you say a few words?"

She heard Martin murmur something like "Good Lord," and she reached quickly to pat him reassuringly as she stood up. She almost giggled at his astonishment, but as she walked to the front a great quietness settled on her and the hall was very still. She knew that she looked well and that she was dressed well and that what she would say, no matter what it was, would be honest. She had not prepared a speech because she knew that she would forget it, and she knew she could retire to her seat if words stopped coming to her. She reached the stand on which some speakers leaned in

relaxed confidence and others grasped for support. Then she put her hands behind her back, stepped a little away from the stand, and looked up.

"My name is Abbie," she said. "I am an alcoholic.

"I cannot tell a complete story. Things escape me and I do not know what the whole story is and I have never spoken before a gathering of any kind. I do know that tonight, in some way I can't explain, that I am entirely different from what I was three months ago. The change is not because of anything I did myself beyond being ready to accept help. The help came from AA and in particular from one member of AA. That I can stand here sober and speak at all seems unbelievable. Only another alcoholic can understand how very strange it is. Not simply that I am sober. I have been sober before, when I was hospitalized and when I went on the wagon several times, but that I wish to stay sober always, and stranger still that I am happy about it."

She stopped speaking now and the listeners moved slightly in sympathy, as though the momentum of their combined nudge would start the words once more.

"I started drinking in high school. It seemed very exciting and maybe I was a bit of a rebel. Many speakers say they drank to gain confidence. I had more than enough confidence. I just wanted something more exciting. I was expelled during my freshman year at college and then got more wild yet, drinking all the time. I've been married and divorced three times, all because of drinking. I don't think I was ever really aware during those years that other people existed for their own selves but only as props for my pleasure. I got very sick, of course, eventually. Not only physically sick but disgusted with myself and more than that with all of life. I thought I would stay trapped forever. I tried suicide twice, once a sort of fake suicide in self-pity because I knew I wouldn't really die. But the second time I was determined. My intention was discovered and somebody prevented it."

Again Abbie stopped, finding her breath short. She closed her mouth and breathed deeply and moved closer to the stand for support.

"Oh, I don't know what to say," she said. "I still don't think clearly. Sometimes I feel it was necessary for me to suffer what I did. It couldn't have happened any other way. I believe this and so I can rest with the past. I don't know much about AA philosophy. I can't repeat the steps. But I do know the people in AA. They have all been kind to me and concerned about my well-being, and yet



they haven't been nosy and officious the way most people are when they try to help you.

"I hope I have the good sense to hold on to what I have, to what has been given to me. It is so much more, so very much more, than just staying sober, but it can all be washed out with just one drink. If I keep on talking, I'll begin to shiver or to weep. I feel it too much. Thank you for listening."

She walked down the aisle with her face down, not aware of the applause that followed her. She slumped into her seat beside Martin.

"It was just right," he whispered to her. "You look lovely, so fresh and honest. Ah, my little Abbie," he said softly. "How fine you are."

Now she would have liked to have closed her eyes and rubbed herself like a cat in unseeing comfort against his coat.

There was an anniversary dance at one of the Boston groups the next Friday evening. Martin picked up Ralph and then stopped by for Alice and Abbie.

"Evelyn is having a party at her house," Martin said. "She'll be dancing at home."

Abbie shuddered slightly. She could not yet think of a party except in terms of danger. She had not exposed herself to the drinking of others and she did not know how she would react to it. I hope she is all right, she said silently. For herself she would just as soon not have to face such things. Was she cowardly? It was not running away, just avoiding, she thought. Maybe later it wouldn't bother her.

She had persuaded Mrs. Kershoff to let her wear one of the store's party dresses, promising to pay for it if she soiled it.

The dress was filmy blue with a wide skirt. She did not know if perhaps it was too youthful for her and maybe a little too grand for an AA dance. It seemed like a dress a young virgin waiting for love should wear, not her. It wasn't a dress one tossed with an abandoned fling to the single chair of a motel room. But I've changed, I can wear it, it's mine, she thought. It made her look more fragile than she really was but the colour went well with her dark hair and eyes and the clean, pale leanness of her face.

A strange sort of informal formality pervaded the hall where the dance was held. The faces and clothes were as assorted as those in a modern historical mural: the pin-striped lawyer and the wrinkled-serged roofer, the Amazonian tenement brawler and the suburban housewife. Even a millionaire was present, though his appearance

was disappointing because the booze had left him as red-faced as a wheat farmer during harvesting.

But as the evening advanced the friendliness overcame restraint, the enclosed emotion slipped its guard, the exercise restored resilience. Against their own doubt they began to find a genuine enjoyment. The laughter increased, the jokes hovered on the scandalous, the music was enhanced. People called to each other across the hall. The hubbub increased. One might have supposed the dance was being nourished secretly by the hip flask as in Prohibition days. They found that even at a dance they could be happy sober.

The movement and the people were for Abbie a wall around herself and Martin. He looked very handsome, she thought. She hoped he liked her dress. He did not mention the dress but he did seem to want her for every dance. Reluctantly, she saw, he gave her to Ralph in exchange for Alice. She had to coax Dick to dance with her. He seemed somewhat awed by the gathering. He was a bit shorter than herself and she could not resist rubbing her cheek against his clean lard plate, she loved his kindness and his clownishness so, yes, and his deep faith that saw all pain and distress as agents for an ultimate goodness.

Dick surrendered her to a young man from the Auburn group who almost immediately asked to take her home and then tried to make a later date with her. When she refused persistently, he wanted to know the reason for her refusal. He was young, strong, and confident. He was dressed well and was possessed of a certain social facility.

"I'm committed," she said.

"Committed?" he asked, frowning.

Abbie laughed. "Not like to an asylum," she said. "Like to a course of action."

As she laughed she caught sight of Martin. He was standing at the side of the dance floor watching her, his face still, his eyes wide and slightly wounded, his cheeks seeming to have a deeper hollow. Her own gaze became transfixed, the laughter falling in a slow erasure. Helplessly she raised her fingers from the man's back in an indeterminate gesture to re-establish her identity with Martin. Either he did not see her hand or misread her intention for his face showed no acknowledgement. The intervening space and people seemed threatening. She wanted the dance to end before her apprehension became a defined fear. When it did end she broke quickly and sought Martin and stood close to him, clinging to his arm.

"I don't think I'd better dance any more," she said.

"Are you a little tired, Abbie?" he asked.

"No, not tired," she said, looking up at him, at his eyes searching for understanding.

"A little nervous?"

"No. Nothing wrong," she said. "It's just——" She spread her palms in a gesture of unexplained helplessness.

"Yes, of course," he said. He picked up her hand and held it.

"You know I can't say the things I'd like to say," Abbie said.

"Yes."

"You know what they are, what they would be if I could?"

"Yes."

"Well, so," she said, feeling happy once more and laughing up at him. "So I don't think I ought to dance any more."

He touched the back of her head with his cupped hand.

"All right. Please don't think I'm an idiot, Abbie," he said. "It's just that I'm still uncertain about some things."

"Not about me, Martin?"

"No, Abbie. About myself."

They dropped off Ralph first and when they reached the rooming house Alice went directly in, leaving Abbie alone with Martin in the dim doorway. He put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her forehead.

"Did you have a good time?" he asked.

"Yes," she said slowly and with a faint doubt. She could not restrain the sorrow from her voice. The evening was over. Evenings had never been over for her. Tomorrow she would return the dress. She realized now that she had gone through the evening with a sense of abatement as though a climax would inevitably follow. It was the old pattern. But now she would remove the dress carefully and lay its folds back in the box and return it to the racks. Would the newness in her have to be returned, too? For the garment of loveless love?

Martin had let his hands remain on her shoulders. He was staring at her, not narrowly but widely, as though he could see the whole vista of her journey. Does he know, really? Is he waiting or evading? Patience or pity? What is it he sees beyond my face? Lust or love? I have tried.

Now he moved his touch behind her shoulders. She felt the gentle propulsion of his hands on her back. Their sight was still bound. She closed her eyes to retain herself but raised up on her toes. Then she remained still, afraid to disturb the moment with any motion, timorous that her desire might be nakedly disclosed, knowing that

the assertion of love now might blight it, as she received his kiss on her mouth and quivered when his trailing fingers stopped to hold her breasts in a light and brief caress.

Then they were separated and he was holding her hands and smiling at her. He said, "Good night, Abbie," and she turned and ran up the stairs, knowing a joyous confirmation.

## XXIX

"Who is your company to be?" asked Mrs. Hardy, who had been hired to cook and then serve dinner. Mrs. Hardy did not act like a servant, not even like an employee. When she served dinner she wore the air of a guest who is not hungry and has good-naturedly decided to pitch in and help.

"Oh, the pillars of Prudential," Evelyn called back from her bedroom. "The Johns of Hancock."

"Not the Lloyds of London?" Mrs. Hardy asked.

"They're away. The Lumberman's Casualty, of course, and Mutual Maternity."

Evelyn, who had been feeling quite gay and irresponsible now that preparations had been completed, frowned at herself in the mirror, almost catching a memory, something ominous. "A joke? She couldn't trace the significance. She shrugged and continued dressing, wanting to be fresh and ready when Robert came home so she could fuss around him as he shaved and changed his suit and his shirt. She was very happy for him and for herself. The details of shopping and planning, which would have seemed insurmountable several months ago, had been accomplished easily and with enjoyment. Everything was all set. Bobby and Elaine were staying with Robert's mother for the night.

She was still in her slip when she heard Robert say hello to Mrs. Hardy. Evidently he had caught an early train. He came into her room, closed the door, and walked over to take her in his arms. He kissed her lips and nibbled at the lobe of her ear. A tickling made her shiver and she moved his head down to her neck.

"Oh, Robert. That's enough," she said. "Your shirt and things are ready."

He stepped back and held her hands and looked her up and down as though quite willing to forget the dinner and company.

"Sit down here a minute," Evelyn said, relaxing on the bed. "What will I do tonight about drinking, Robert?"

"Oh," he said.

He lit a cigarette and remained standing, looking down at her with the adoration lingering in his eyes though his mouth had resumed its normal inexpressiveness. "It's a problem," he said. He paced back and forth a few steps.

"Funny," he said, "that we have to drink at all. I don't feel like it but these men and their wives will expect it, and -well, Evelyn, I've changed, you know. Things have been shifting in the columns of importance. I don't know if I can stand them in the evening any longer without their having had a few drinks. If they don't drink, they'll talk insurance or local politics and if we don't serve it, it will make a bad impression. And of course my promotion is involved in their decisions. I'd much rather, for instance, have your Martin drop in and sit talking to him. But that's the way things are. I'm an insurance man."

He shrugged and spread his hands in apology.

"I even tried to make a kind of department of you for a while." He laughed suddenly. "I tried to put you in a filing cabinet but you didn't fit. Your breasts were always popping out and disturbing me."

Evelyn threw herself back on the bed and laughed wildly.

"Oh, Robert!"

"Seriously," he said, "there are things that I know now I have to put up with. Before, I thought I could make them part of me."

Evelyn sat up again.

"But what will I do? I can't just say I'm an alcoholic."

"Why don't you take one Martini before dinner? Just hold it and nurse it. It can't do you any harm and you'll be eating right after. Then in the evening hold a glass of ginger ale. But you know I wouldn't blame you for drinking a little, listening to the lot of us getting steamed up over nothing."

"All right. Come on now, hurry. You have to get dressed. Give me a kiss before you go, Robert. I'll be in to tie your tie for you."

Four couples came. The men were all older than Robert, the women older than Evelyn. They sat in the large living-room with its modern furniture and drank the Martinis Evelyn carried in. She put her own glass down on an end table after a very small sip. She did not stimulate any conversation, letting Robert offer openings.

During the time before dinner Evelyn hovered dangerously in her role of hostess. The company was slightly uneasy at her remarks and facial expressions. They were not quite sure whether she was laughing with them. A certain ambiguity in her responses brought various trains of conversations to abrupt halts. She finished the Martini at her elbow. Once Robert looked curiously at her, not in alarm but more in amusement, as though suspecting her of carrying on some secret imaginative pastime. When Mrs. Patterson mentioned an afternoon give-away programme, Evelyn gushed.

"Oh, I was so thrilled!" she said. "That day the woman from Tennessee got all those things. Imagine! Six operations and seven children. You could see it, of course. The strain in her face. My heart was beating for her. The whole heart of the nation was wrung like a big white sheet on wash day. Tears all over the land."

Evelyn, who had collected the glasses once more, turned away rapidly, thinking: Now Robert will be really startled. He knew she loathed such programmes. I'd better stop. Why do I feel this way? They'll demote him to office boy if they catch on to me. Right now they're all thinking Robert's wife is nice-looking but stupid. I beat Mrs. Patterson. My enthusiasm simply swamped hers. She giggled softly to herself.

She went to the kitchen, having the excuse of duties. Actually, with Mrs. Hardy there was nothing to do. She poured a drink of gin for her and another Martini for herself, without any qualifying thought.

"Mud," she said to Mrs. Hardy, raising her glass.

"Yes, dear," Mrs. Hardy replied.

But with dinner being served she settled down and was attentive to her guests' needs and enjoyment. Her own appetite had dwindled considerably. The conversation became crisscrossed, the response coming from the person farthest away from the original speaker. Everyone seemed loud-mouthed. It was as bewildering as having spots before your eyes. She smiled and nodded and made last-second stabs at remarks that were in danger of getting through to left field.

The men all seemed to have a tremendous hunger. She was disturbed not at the quantity they were eating but at the time it was taking. She had become weary of sitting motionless in her chair. They talked so much, so heartily, as they ate. She wished Robert would not lead them on. He was having a great success with football, with boxing, with the administration, with the evils of welfare. She cast about for a plausible excuse to rise and go into the kitchen,

but she could think of none. A picket fence of people. How they penned you in. She offered further helpings briefly, accepting refusals without protest, and had Mrs. Hardy serve dessert. She had to toy with her own. How can they drink and then eat something sweet? But at last, accepting compliments with a thin-edged smile, she let them all trail into the living-room and with a short apology escaped to the kitchen. It did not occur to her that she was in any sort of danger.

In the living-room now there would be a replenished dullness with responses in grunts and murmurs. Someone would have to lug a topic up a steep grade. You could not allow silence to settle like a strange plague. I should be in there prodding the women, she thought. How soon would it be decent to offer highballs? Not soon enough. Brandy. Ah, that was it! But there was no brandy in the house.

"Mrs. Hardy, you have your car. Do me a favour, will you? Get a bottle of the best brandy from the liquor store? It's something I forgot."

"Give them a shot of rye," Mrs. Hardy said.

"No. These men are important to Mr. Johnson in his business. Be a good scout, now, and while you're gone I'll be straightening up a little."

Evelyn went into the living-room and looked about.

"Will you excuse me for about fifteen minutes? Something to do in the kitchen."

Within the wider circle of the evening's passage, there was now her own arc of motive and plan, unobserved by anyone. When Mrs. Hardy had departed Evelyn took a shot of rye and began scraping and stacking the dinner plates. As Mrs. Hardy drove back into the driveway, she took one more. Then she served the brandy. Mr. Patterson took his glass with a deep sigh of satisfaction.

"And a cigar," he said, reaching into his breast pocket. "Heaven, simply heaven."

Robert was pleased, noticing this and the number of glasses.

"But you're not having any," someone said.

"No. It's too strong for me," Evelyn answered.

"Strong drink and wild women," one of the men remarked, yawning.

The remark, in that manner, seemed so incongruous that Evelyn laughed. Considerably louder than a polite responsive chuckle. She saw Robert frown. He has seen me take only one drink, I won't take any more. But now the exhilaration welled up sharply, the wit and

the gleam, the sparkling awareness and the relaxed concern. She was filled with an abounding vitality. She replenished highball glasses, started the record player, and with Robert moved some furniture to clear a space for dancing.

"If you get tired, take a drink," he whispered. "One won't do anything to you."

She danced with Mr. Patterson, the bulldozer, Mr. Lumberman, a crane, another who was like a black-hole ditch-digger, continually shovelling salted peanuts into his mouth, letting them slide and tumble from his palm.

Evelyn did not think about what she was drinking now. She carried a highball around or had it within reach. Also, she had a few alone in the kitchen. She did not get noticeably drunk. Her control of her physical motion was good, her face was not dispersed, the words came from her mouth in what might have been an intentionally comic manner. Certainly it was her *élan* which set the tone of the evening and allowed her guests to be more uninhibited. But abruptly and noisily the party was over and she was leaning against the door that had closed on the last guest.

"You were fine, Evelyn," Robert was saying. "Everything went well. How do you feel?"

She turned around with tightened composure.

"I guess I like our evenings alone too much," she said. "I scarcely saw you at all."

She knew he would not come to bed with her. He had explained it once. He did not like to come to her from a social group where he felt himself carrying the imprints of contacts with others. He had to come to her from his aloneness. He kissed her briefly.

"Leave everything," he said. "I'll help in the morning."

"Good night, Robert. I'll just pick up one or two things."

Now she thought of what she had had to drink. How many? The consciousness of it burdened her. The voices of AA sounded. What would they all think? Martin, Abbie. She went into the kitchen. But it's only the one night. I've been dry now for a long time. Am I really an alcoholic? Robert told me to have one. Even as these thoughts pounded in a heavy pulsation, she was pouring one last one in a water glass, filling it as high as a whisky glass, so that she drank three ounces, not one.

She looked into a cupboard and moved some condiments about. There was an olive jar with only three left. She poured out the brine between her fingers, catching the olives and tossing them into her mouth. She rinsed the jar and hesitated. There was a fifth of rye,



three-quarters filled, and a fifth of gin half-filled. She picked up the bottle of rye and poured all but two inches into the olive jar. The two bottles, then, the gin and the rye, looked like the normal residue of a party.

In her bedroom she put the jar upright in the corner of the bottom drawer of her dresser and began to disrobe. The lovely white underthings were damp with perspiration. A shower was the thing to wash away the soil of the evening. Hot, then cold.

Evelyn took the shower, put out her light, and got into bed. The freshness lasted ten minutes and then the heat within began once more to extrude sweat. But she caught sleep before this occurred and she lay there breathing with her mouth open, her limbs loosened, while the alcohol began again its organic tracings and its acid etching on her stony brain.

Once in the night she awoke, sharply with rigid fear. Then she remembered. Distrustful of sleep, she arose. In the darkness she felt for her dresser but then stopped, posed in a tense listening. She tiptoed into the kitchen across the path of filtered street light. She could distinguish the bottle she wanted by its weight. The gin made her shudder, but in bed the warm wave engulfed her and she slept again.

It wasn't until the middle of the next afternoon, Saturday, that the trembling came. Robert had been busy in the morning, getting the tune-up job done to the car, testing it on the highway, and then having readjustments made. It was evident to Evelyn that he thought her lethargy was a normal reaction from a late evening party, though he himself was happy and energetic.

The children had not returned from their grandmother's and Evelyn set about straightening up the house with a depressing sense of failure. The memory of the evening before offered her no point of consolation.

In the afternoon Robert was watching a football game on television. The children had gone to the movies. It was then, as she was trying to read a magazine in an effort to escape her mind, that she was gripped and shaken. She found herself swallowing rapidly, the magazine vibrated in her hands, one leg twitched. She protested to herself, trying to create a calm by reason. I only drank at a party one night. I haven't drunk for weeks and weeks. I'm strong and healthy. But the tension increased and the words she saw would not form a consecutive meaning.

The room, despite the noise of the television, was strangely quiet and distant. Was her hearing defective? Last night seemed long

ago. Everything was partially separated from her by a time that had ragged apertures so that she had to peer into the hours gone and wait for the minute's emergence. A drink to taper off, to get over the let-down.

"I'm going to take a nap," she said to Robert. "I guess I'm not up to parties."

But again she did not go to the jar in her dresser. She ran water in the kitchen sink loudly. She did not trust her hand to hold the bottle near the glass without striking it. The noise would carry. She drank from the water glass and rinsed it.

Beneath a soft quilt in her bedroom she slept gratefully, quite certain before she lost consciousness that the whole crisis was over.

## XXX

ON MONDAY Ralph Hilton awoke without any enthusiasm for the day's work ahead. It would be like every other work day, an erosion of energy and integrity. When he came down into the kitchen, Anne and the two girls were already eating breakfast. His daughters said good morning, his wife did not. He stood at the stove cooking some eggs and heating water for instant coffee. He had cooked his own breakfast for so many years that no feeling of resentment at Anne's neglect occurred to him. Some happy anticipation or school activities had the two girls chattering.

"Sit down, Dad, sit down," Shirley said, pushing herself along the breakfast bench. "I trust you are well this morning, Father?"

She liked playing with elaborate bits of speech remembered from television plays.

"It's this gout, plague take it," Ralph whined, limping from the stove with his plate. "And those old wounds from the Indian wars."

"Have you consulted a reliable physician, dear Father?" Shirley asked.

"Doctor Teaberry has advised standing on my head while swinging Indian clubs but somehow it always makes my ears ache so."

"Do not despair," Ellen said.

They both looked at him with wide serious eyes and mouths hovering on laughter.

"Come on, now," Anne said. "You've got to get your hair combed

yet and your school things aren't ready. Come on, come on," she said irritably, rising from the table. "And make that Josephine wait outside for you. I don't want her in the house all the time. She noses around too much."

When the children had gone Ralph went upstairs to get a notebook and pencil from his bureau. Anne was waiting for him as he came back down.

"We can't go on this way any longer," she said.

He looked at her a moment reflectively before saying, "What way?"

"With the bank account dwindling away. You're going to have to start paying the bills."

"Well, put the bank account back the way it was and it won't dwindle."

"What are you doing with your money?"

"Nothing," Ralph said. "I'll start paying the bills when you put the account right."

"Everything is in your name. I'm not going to make the payment on the mortgage this month."

"The bank will be more than happy to take over the house for the balance."

"Oh, you're so smart," Anne said, "going out all dressed up in your nice car."

"I'm going to work."

He closed the door behind him. Yet even now as he walked to the garage he was sorry to leave her there alone in the house with her bitter frustration. He hesitated. But what good would it do if he returned? A bolt of lightning was needed, not a few words. He drove off in a cloud of dejection that was as intense as when he had been drinking. A dry drunk? Was he on a dry drunk, as some alcoholics called it?

His first call was at a factory in Hudson, an account he had been trying to secure for some months. The buyer had promised him a trial order and had then delayed. Ralph knew that his pose that morning should be one of enthusiastic, cheerful assumption that the buyer would hesitate to destroy. But he could not shake his depression. To hell with it. I'm not going to wag my tail this morning. He carried his set, unsmiling face into the office of the buyer, who borrowed immediately Ralph's air of despair. He complained of slow orders, low prices for shoes, labour conditions, and asked Ralph to stop in again in a couple of weeks.

The next call was at large factory in Worcester, a steady account

he had sold for a number of years. Ralph was sitting in a small waiting-room when the buyer charged in at him. He was a man of quick temper, but before he had been soothed by Ralph's deep voice and sympathy. Now, however, he was enraged.

"You got me in one son of a bitch of a mess," he shouted without preamble. "If I could have got you on the phone I'd have told you not to bother calling any more."

"What's the trouble?" Ralph asked.

"Look at that!"

The buyer shoved out a swatch of pink lining. The top coating over the pink laquer had yellowed.

"Five hundred yards of it! The stupid cutter cut it all up, too. Over four hundred cases of cut linings we can't use! That's not the worst of it. Oh, no! All the shoes on the racks waiting to be lined in and packed and not a goddam lining we can use. The racks tied up. Everything screwed up. You can cancel any orders we got with you."

"Oh now, wait a minute," Ralph protested. "Something in our topcoat formula went wrong, that's all. The yellowing doesn't show up right away. With our reputation do you think we'd take a chance shipping seconds? How long would we be in business that way? Listen, something went wrong. Doesn't anything ever go wrong with your shoes? You've been using our stuff a long time without trouble. Aren't we entitled to one mistake?"

"No. Oh no!" the buyer objected, feeling his wrath losing its justification.

"So we lose the account because your cutter don't know what a lining should look like? Now, sit down a minute. Next week I'll bring up the boss with me and we'll figure what it cost you and give you credit for it. In the meantime, don't take a gamble with a new supplier when you've had such a long satisfactory service with us. Let's go along the way we are. We give you a good price and good quality. Our deliveries have been prompt. We don't try to load you up with colours you'll get stuck with."

"It's too late," the buyer said. "I've already got the stuff replaced by a competitor of yours. He got me out of the jam by rushing some yardage up here. What am I going to do, throw him out now? I'm not going to sleep with your mistakes. I got nothing against you. You don't make the stuff. But tell that company of yours to wake up."

As he lit a cigarette and looked through a cloud of smoke at the apoplectic face of the buyer, Ralph became conscious of his own

tension. His hand trembled. He knew he had lost the account temporarily. He would have to call the company to cancel the orders on hand. He tried to counteract the dread with indifference but a long faculty for assuming guilt that was not rightly his would not permit it. It's not my fault, he protested to himself. Yet he was personally involved. He could not separate himself from his associations. He fumbled now in all his pockets, in his side coat pockets and then in his trouser pockets, as he looked from the buyer towards the door and shifted his brief case from hand to hand.

"You can see my position," the buyer said in apology as he saw Ralph retreat in a disturbed manner. "I have my job to care for. What would my boss say if I continued to buy from you now without trying someone else?"

"It's all right," Ralph said. "I'll see you next week."

He had to get away quickly now. His legs felt weak. He coughed briefly. Where was the tolserol? In the glove compartment? He'd take two and wait for an hour before calling. But where was it? He remembered he had changed his suit. It was in his coat pocket at home.

He was gasping slightly by the time he reached his car. He leaned a hand against it to steady himself a moment before unlocking it and getting in behind the wheel. Outside the city, he thought, I'll park somewhere. He drove as though expecting some hazard. The half-pint in the air duct. All this time? Why should I be breathing heavy? My heart? My heart is okay. Nerves.

The streets were thin-fogged and dripping, the day dark. Dirty light shone in the lunchrooms, the windows were moisture streaked. The dreariness clogged his lungs. The sidewalk seemed slippery. As he entered the drugstore his sense of smell was acute: medicinal smells, cigar smoke, spearmint gum, newspapers, rubber goods. He was slightly nauseated by the assault of odours. The phone booth was in the rear. He put all his change on the small counter below the phone. He was grateful there was a seat in the booth.

Ralph let out a long sigh and slipped the half-pint from his hip pocket. No one could see. The pharmacist was in the front behind the cigar counter.

He left the phone booth after four or five minutes. He had taken two drinks and had sat waiting for their effect before dialling the operator. Then he decided to drive around a while till he quieted down. It was an hour later when he made the call. He had taken one more drink while driving, going down a side street and glancing sharply about before tipping the bottle up.

The sales manager was out. The president of the company came on the phone.

"We've lost the Rawling's account," Ralph said. "They got in a jam over five hundred yards of pink that yellowed and got cut up."

"Are you sure it was our material?"

"They've been giving us all their business. It was ours, all right."

"But can't we replace it?"

"They've already replaced it from a competitor. Their buyer is hotheaded. He blew up. I can't say I blamed him."

"We seem to be having trouble with accounts lately. What's the matter?"

"The factory is turning out some lousy material, that's all," Ralph said.

"It can't be just that. All factories have complaints occasionally."

"Listen, I've lost two large accounts because of defective material," Ralph said sharply. "What do you want me to do? I can't go down there and make the stuff."

"Well, there's another thing. If the material has been cut we can't give any credit for it."

"What?" Ralph shouted. "Rawlings gives us fifteen thousand dollars' business a year and you'll lose the account permanently for a lousy four hundred dollar credit that was our fault?"

The president was silent for a time.

"Ralph," he said, "something is troubling you lately. Maybe we ought to have a little talk."

"Have a little talk, in Jesus' name! What do you want me to do, feel happy because the factory is screwing me out of accounts by shipping out crap?"

"I'll see you when you come down."

"All right. I've got calls to make," Ralph said, hanging up.

He knew now that the president would hold him responsible for the loss of the account. Good God, is it me who is screwy in my reasoning? If the president followed his usual pattern he would allow some time to pass and then he would remark quietly, "I wonder why we don't get any business out of Rawlings in Worcester." But the real vexation was this, that the president actually would wonder because by that time his self-deception would be complete.

He drove out of the city aimlessly but before he reached the outskirts he bought another half-pint. Ahead he saw a motel in a pine grove. An idea struck him. He had plenty of money. He turned into the motel driveway and took an end room. It was eleven in the

morning. He did not feel he would want lunch. He closed the blinds and set the two half-pint bottles on a small table beside the bed. He undressed completely, turned on the radio softly, and got into bed. In the daytime twilight with the quiet music, taking a sip of whisky occasionally, he felt at peace. A small vacation. Alone. A secret rest stolen from the world. He thought of Alice Fairchild. She was not married. I need a woman. Ironic name for an alcoholic. But she was beautiful, he thought. Young and undamaged by booze. Probably passionate. Evelyn a few years younger. Evelyn was happily married. He'd ask Alice for a date. Would she go? He was older, maybe eighteen years. But nowadays it would be a relief, knowing we were both alcoholics and accepting it.

Ralph washed the scratch of guilt this thought occasioned with another drink. It was only today. His daydream began to reform itself: divorce, remarriage to Alice, settling on another job in another state. The thought of his daughters caused him pain. What can I do?

Ralph took one more drink, finishing the first half-pint and leaving the second intact, before he fell asleep. He was pleasantly and quietly drunk and his sleep was undisturbed. When he awoke it was four o'clock. Through the open window the bright sun slanted to the floor beside the bed. When he swung his legs out he felt its pooled warmth on his bare feet. A happiness remained implanted in him. He felt energetic, calm, replenished. He splashed some water on his face, combed his hair, walked about naked and stretching for a few moments, remembering his thoughts about Alice. An old, almost forgotten sensation of being in love came to him. Yes, he would ask her to go out with him. A suspicion that he was creating a situation without foundation came to him. What did it matter how it came? What did it matter if he was talking himself into it? God knows it is what I need. How warm the sun is. The air is clean now.

On Wednesday he saw Alice at the Deering meeting. At the sight of her his vague emotion was sharply confirmed. He sat next to her looking at her hands clasped in her lap, at the intertwined fingers, a ring, and the painted nails, and he wondered how it would feel to be caressed by the hands that were pale, smooth-textured, and unworn. He did not follow the speaker's words. Lately, all the talk seemed repetitive, the older members speaking of the steps, the newer members of their drinking patterns and social troubles. But now he was surprised to hear Dick call on Abbie, and listening to her, hearing the embarrassed, tremulous sincerity, and noting that

she appeared in a timid transfiguration that seemed to create a void about her, he was overwhelmed by an aching tenderness. Without thinking, he took one of Alice's hands in his own, transferring to her his need for release. Her head turned in a brief questioning but she let her hand remain.

When Abbie sat down Ralph turned to Alice and spoke softly.

"There's a dance at a Boston group Friday. Perhaps we could go with Martin and Abbie?"

"All right," she answered with only a slight hesitation.

## 2

Ralph's wife was in the darkened living-room when he returned from the meeting. There was a glass of wine on the coffee table by the sofa. She spoke to him with a strained pleasantry. He responded without sympathy and then said he was going to bed. She said something to delay him. He saw that she was in a thin nightgown and then he realized that she wanted the one night's reconciliation. No, he protested, I won't. Not now or ever.

"I'm tired. I'm going to bed," he said.

"You're not tired from anything you've done for me."

"No," he agreed.

"Did you go for your bottle the way you used to?" his wife asked.

The question and exposure startled him.

"What difference does it make?"

"None to a drunk."

He continued across the living-room to the stairs.

"Don't think I'm going to sit here night after night alone," she said.

"I'm not asking you to. You can go out whenever you want to. I'll stay home with the children."

"You'd like that so you'd feel free, wouldn't you? Well, nobody's going to be able to say anything about me."

"No, of course not," he said.

"Oh, don't act so goddam good!" she cried.

All the next day, during which he made the long trip to New Hampshire, a sense of well-being allowed him to relax. When he stopped at the trailer for lunch David and Helen remarked on how well he looked. He was surprised at how pale and worn both of them remained. He was relieved that neither of them asked him a direct question about drinking. He would have lied to have avoided



the explanation and the embarrassment. David seemed nonchalantly bitter. Ralph mentioned that he was going to the dance with Alice.

"I bet she's good-looking now," Helen said.

"She's nice," Ralph answered.

"A romance?" Helen questioned.

"Aw," David said. "What's romance? Another appetite. Why do people get so churned up about it? You wind up in bed if you're successful, that's all."

"That's all?" Helen said. "Oh, Davey."

Ralph saw that she was on the verge of tears as she turned away to reach for some dishes. He wished that he could offer some consoling remark. He could sense the emptiness in David, the complete disbelief. What is it? he wondered. When they have each other. If I had love. . . .

He drove away strengthened in his determination to push events towards some kind of climax. By late afternoon he had projected himself into love. It was almost as though Alice was sitting beside him, so strong was the fragrance and colour of his imaginings.

His escape from the house on Friday evening was accomplished in the face of the usual recriminations by Anne. He said merely that he was going to a special meeting. It was not an outright lie. Lately he had become acutely aware of the various shades of falsehood and he remembered that in the past he had lied often to avoid emotional disturbances, not only about drinking but about many household activities; about the price he paid for some item of clothing, about the time the children went to bed if his wife had been visiting. Before, he had excused himself on the grounds of his wife being hypercritical, but now the lies tormented him in small stabs of conscience. He wanted a return of an integrity he had once possessed but as yet he lacked the courage to grasp it and each small deceit reminded him of his failure.

When he saw Alice in the full light of the hall, his hope faltered. She seemed too perfectly groomed and composed to be attainable. He lacked almost completely a consciousness of his own height and distinction and the thought that Alice might be proud of being escorted by him simply did not occur to him. He was glad the gathering was commonplace in dress and appearance. They were standing in a group with Martin, Abbie, and Dick. Ralph excused himself and went to the washroom where he swallowed two tolserol. Oh well, at least I can dance well, he thought.

A certain confidence was restored to him as he returned and saw

Alice's eyes searching anxiously for him and then her smile as she sighted him. She took his arm.

"You look so stern," she said. "But nice."

"Oh," he said, "I get tight once in a while—tense. I haven't danced without being plastered for quite a few years."

"I've been held up myself quite often."

"With you it would be a pleasure," Ralph said.

Alice danced close to him. It seemed quite improbable that he was holding her, that he could smell her hair, that he could feel the motion of her body against him.

"Do you like working in the office?" he asked.

"It's fun. I'm a little dumb yet."

"What do they think of Martin?"

"Everybody respects and admires him. The girls all want to get transferred to his section. Nobody knows he is an alcoholic. They just know he used to drink a lot. Poor Abbie."

"Why poor?"

"Martin seems untouchable."

"Oh, he's been around."

"I didn't mean that. I mean she would do anything for him. Even go without him. But he doesn't even seem aware of it."

"You're wrong, Alice," he said. "It wouldn't be because he wasn't aware of it. It would be something else."

He had the third dance with Abbie. Behind the glow of her beauty, behind her smile, he sensed the gentle sadness in her. One would have liked to have held her till she fell asleep. His own bitterness turned to sorrow.

"How nice you look, Abbie," he said.

"What's the matter, Ralph?" she said.

"Oh," he said casually, "things don't go right. But then they never did. Probably they never will."

"What things? When you came in you were happy. Now you act as if you'd like to leave. What things, Ralph?" She smiled at him.

"Something about Alice?"

"Oh," he said, shrugging.

"She's a fine girl."

"I know. Too fine, maybe."

After a while, Abbie said, "You're almost the opposite of what I am, Ralph."

"I should hope so," he said.

"I mean the way I was. I knew I was good-looking and attractive. I was aware of how other people saw me and I was full of confi-

dence. I thought I could get away with everything. You don't think you can get away with anything."

"Abbie, I was going to ask Alice to go out with me," he said, in a sudden need to confide.

"So?" she said.

"I changed my mind. I don't think she would go."

"I used to know a lot of girls like you," Abbie said.

"Really? Amazing."

Abbie laughed with him.

"Well, now you're laughing, anyway," she said.

"How were they like me?"

"They were beautiful girls who did not know it. They longed for a man and a man longed for them and neither of them ever knew it. They didn't have any sense of themselves at all. You would have thought their breasts were burdens."

"It's a thing that has never troubled me," Ralph said.

"Many women would love you if they had the chance, if they weren't already in love. You're tall, you're handsome, you're quiet and gentle, you look strong. So ask Alice."

"Abbie, I'm married."

"But not in a good way, are you? When marriages go rotten, you die if you stay in them. Mine went rotten because of booze. But is yours that way? You're dry now."

"It may be too late," he said with a sense of fatality.

"For what, in the name of goodness? Will you ask her?"

"Yes, teacher," he said, smiling down at her.

As he returned to Alice, Ralph noticed once more that she was looking for him. The orchestra was taking a break, having coffee and sandwiches at a buffet.

"Alice, will you go out with me next Saturday evening?" he said abruptly.

"Surely," she said.

"We can have dinner somewhere and then—then what? It's so long since I've had a date, I don't know what to plan."

"Oh, we'll find something to do."

On the way home they sat in the back of Martin's car. Ralph took her hand rather timidly. He fluctuated between confidence and chagrin.

With a sort of despair he put his arm around Alice. She raised her face with the motion and the kiss followed, a soft kiss, tentative and searching. He moved a hand to her shoulder. He wanted to touch her cheek but he felt his hand was soiled. He moved the hand

to her hair. For the remainder of the ride they kissed each other. Once he started to put his hand to her breast but some small motion frightened his hand away.

Looking up, he said, "My street."

"Good night, Ralph," Alice said.

"Will I see you at the Wednesday-night meeting?"

"I'll come with Abby. Thanks for taking me to the dance."

"Oh," he said. "It was good of you to come with me. I'm not very entertaining. I'll be more awake Saturday."

For four days Ralph lived withdrawn in dreams. A gentleness masked all his words and actions. When driving he would park the car for a few minutes to look across the sweep of a marsh or at a house on a distant hillside. The early winter deadness of the countryside was reinvested with beauty. He stared raptly at the black limbs of trees against the grey sky. His talks with his customers were restrained, searching for points of contact outside the confines of business. All tension was erased in him. He carried the image of Alice's face, the memory of her voice, and, closing his eyes, the impression of her kiss seemed still on his mouth. There was no desire to drink. There would be no need, ever, he thought. His dreams were of what he could give to Alice so that he could watch her laughing face and see joy in her wide clear eyes.

He was almost afraid to go to the Wednesday-night meeting. A sudden loss of faith in the plausibility of his plans and longing made him want to delay his disillusion. No dream of his had ever become actual. With foreboding he entered the hall. Alice came towards him and he was certain she carried an apology. She was smiling with too much friendliness, she was too eager in her approach. But she took his hand and giving him a little tug as though he were a reluctant child said, "Come on, have a cup of coffee with me before the meeting starts."

And walking across to where the coffee and cups were set out on a trestle table, she asked, "What time will you call for me on Saturday?"

He trembled a little. She stood looking up at him. He noticed a small scar at the end of one eyebrow and this tiny imperfection made him long to hold her close in protection. But she looked so immaculately dressed, so carefully arranged in every detail, that he would have been afraid to touch her if they had been alone. They sat together through the meeting and later he could not really remember whether he had taken her hand or she had put her hand in his.

Ralph's wife was waiting for him when he returned from the meeting. She was standing in the centre of the living-room and she began speaking as soon as he closed the door. There was a glass and a half-empty bottle of wine on the coffee table. The ash tray was overflowing.

"What do you think you're getting away with?" she asked. "All week long you've been walking around like a ghost, not speaking to me or the children. If you're angry with me, you don't have to take it out on the kids. At least you can be decent to them. What is it? Are you taking pills? Are you in love? Why don't you say something instead of just standing there?"

"What is there to say? I work, I come home, I eat, I sleep, I go to some meetings."

"And who do you see at the meetings? Some nice alcoholic, eh? Some bum who wants to reform and get a man? Is that what you go for? By God, I'm going to one of these meetings and see."

"I asked you several times to go. You refused. You said it was my problem. You told me to make my own life, that I had sacrificed all my rights in the home."

"Don't think you're going to get away with it. I'll have you in court. Oh, you're rotten."

Her anger and defeat were so great that she could speak only in short inconsecutive exclamations. Ralph sat down to weather the outburst. He knew she wanted to reduce him to a trembling lack of control during which he would make admissions and justify her outraged sense of possession.

Now, vilely, she lowered her voice to an evil intimacy.

"What are you doing? You're not going to bed with me. What are you doing for it? Who rides in the car with you? Or do you do something else?"

He stood up again and rubbed his face, looking away from her, away from the small figure of leering suspicion, from the face pinched with vindictiveness and greed, from the face that was more horrible yet because of the lingering traces of bygone beauty, from the figure with the breasts that had nursed their children and that he himself had kissed so often in tender love, that were thrust out now like threatening appendages. Within himself he collapsed. Oh God, oh Jesus, let me out of here! Let me out of here forever. Let me never, never come back.

"For Christ sake, will you shut up!" he cried.

She forced a sarcastic laugh.

"You don't like it, do you? You don't like knowing."

Abruptly he opened the door, stepped outside, and closed the door softly on her cascading voice. My coat, he thought. There was a topcoat in the car. As he crossed the lawn to his car the door behind him opened.

"Don't bother coming back," his wife called softly, incongruously worried at this moment about the neighbours hearing. "You bastard!" she called, more quietly yet.

As he backed the car into the roadway, his mind became filled with sudden decisions and plans. He felt a great release. Exhilaration swept him. He would ride all night, perhaps over to Vermont, take a room, and sleep all day. Wire the company he was resigning. He felt hungry. I'll stop for a sandwich and coffee. Ah, the stars were out finally. How sensitive the car was. He touched the accelerator pedal and it plunged. He turned on the radio. Music. Alice. I'll be back for Saturday. There must be six or seven hundred dollars in his wallet. Free. As he turned on to the highway he saw the flashing neon lights of a package store. He was surprised. He had supposed it was later than that. He turned into the driveway and entered the bright store, looking along the shelves of coloured labels. What? He had an impulse to buy a whole collection of bottles of different kinds of drinks.

"Give me a pint of Old Grandad," he said. "And a half-pint of brandy. I'd better have a quart of sherry, too."

He put the pint and the quart of sherry under the driver's seat and opened the half-pint before he started the car. He drove for ten minutes and then he took a big gulp of the brandy without slowing down. I'll go to the camp, he thought. Get it ready for Saturday night. He settled himself back in deep pleasure with the music and the smooth night driving. Should he tell Alice about his marriage? He sank into the comfort of his compliant mind.

## XXXI

THE crisis wasn't over, of course. It could not be for an alcoholic. When Evelyn awoke Saturday evening, a fringe of fever lay on her

skin. She looked into the mirror. She was surprised and relieved at her pale complexion. She had supposed she would look flushed. She dreaded the evening meal, knowing her responses would be forced, knowing that sitting there in full view of Robert and the children she would have to find a hiding place behind a veil of gestures and words. But it was not too difficult. She took a big drink of gin and then scrubbed her mouth vigorously with a chlorophyll toothpaste, even swallowing a little as an additional safeguard. A spurt of energy got her through the cooking and during the meal the children talked ceaselessly.

Where she had once longed for Robert to embrace her, she now feared his approach acutely. She knew that if he came to her and looked into her eyes, she would have to avert her gaze and her failure would be apparent. More than anything she was in terror of his cold silent withdrawal. This time, perhaps, there would be no renewed affinity. A devastating loneliness seized her at the thought. What am I doing, what am I doing? she cried within herself.

Ferret-like her thought delved into schemes that would confuse appearance and reality. She could not, under any circumstances, have Robert come to her bed. She rose and went to her room. She wanted a drink now but did not dare risk it as yet. After a time she went back as far as the dining-room, waiting till an advertisement was over on the TV lest Robert would rise.

"Robert, I'm going to take a couple of aspirin and get in bed to read," she called.

"Don't bother getting up. I'll see you in the morning. Good night, Robert."

She retreated quickly and in her room breathed with shuddering relief as she went to her bureau for the whisky. Now she would put the light out so she could pretend sleep if he should look in on her. She lay in bed a while and then rose and took another drink. Before she had had the resentment of marriage to lend justification to her drinking and there had been times when she had enjoyed a bitter cynicism, but now there was nothing, no cause to act as a relieving agent so that her self-disgust and her guilt became unbearable.

Suddenly she sat up in happy excitement. What a fool! she exclaimed to herself. The seconal and phenobarbital from Greenleaf Hill. Good Lord! And I've been sweating through the day. She had the small supply in an envelope in her bureau. She put on the light. There were four seconals and six small phenobarbitals. Quarter-grain? They would be for tomorrow. Saved, she thought. Oh,

Robert, she murmured, feeling that he was hers again, feeling her love welling up.

Robert ascribed her Sunday lethargy to menstruation. Dully she prepared dinner and retired to her room after a few mouthfuls. The children and Robert continued to eat. She could hear Robert's happy bantering and the less spontaneous answers of the children as she lay there shuddering. Were the children aware of what was really happening? The whisky was almost gone, the phenobarbital seemed to have little effect. If only she could have a day alone without the strain of facing anyone.

She had her driving licence now. If it was not Sunday she could have gone to the liquor store. Her mouth felt sore from the scrubbing with toothpaste. She would have to save the two remaining seconals for the night. Any large or objective view of her predicament was lost now in petty planning to sustain relief for the ever-increasing need. She could not as yet recognize collapse and surrender as the first requisite for real relief. Oh God, they were right, she thought once as she remembered the AA speakers. As if all this time she had doubted them. But she was still determined to get out of it alone. She could bear exposure to Martin and Abbie, to any AA member, but the shame of facing Robert and the pain of wounding him seemed overwhelming.

But I haven't drunk much, she thought with amazement. Only a pint yesterday. Was it her mental depression that was causing her to feel so nervous and ill? She remembered a speaker saying that the disease seemed to progress even during the time when one was not drinking. But surely not that fast. A pint in twenty-four hours should not have bothered her particularly. But the fear, the quivering, the distaste for food, the instinct to hide, remained.

How long could she deceive Robert? This was the last day. Either she would have to be well tomorrow when he returned from work or she would be discovered. She forced herself to enter the living-room where she held a magazine and turned the pages. But shortly her hands began to shake. She did not dare take the last drink from the olive jar yet, feeling that some greater need would come later. She had to get out of the house. Robert was again watching a football game, the Sunday professionals. The desk with the telephone was at the opposite end of the room. She dialled a number, holding her thumb on the release button, and speaking then into the black silence.

"Hello, Abbie? Oh, nothing special. I just thought I'd give you a ring."



"What are you doing?"

A longer silence.

"Really? Is it cut on the bias?"

"But that shouldn't give you any trouble. It's probably the way you're feeding it. What kind of machine are you using?"

"Well, why don't I run over, Abbie? If I could see it, I'd know what to tell you. I'm not doing anything. No, no, it's no bother. A breath of air will do me good. I'll see you in a few minutes."

She hung up. Walking from the room, she called back, "I'm going to run over to see Abbie. She's having some trouble with a blouse she's making."

"All right," Robert said. "Put on a warm coat. It's cold out."

She was quite capable of driving the car. She was not drunk in any accepted sense. It was only the feverish burden of worry and fear that tortured her and the craving for just that little more to drink which would elevate her to a normal, recognizable response to the world about her. And so she drove slowly, opening a window for the cold air, out on to the highway that was sparsely travelled this day. She did not know exactly where to go, not ever having drunk alone in a public place. Finally in desperation she turned into a driveway. Fortunately there were booths with low lights. Waitresses hustled about. Some soft music was playing. She brushed past a hostess, smiling and removing her gloves, afraid that she might be seated in view of others. She seated herself in a side booth towards the rear without removing her coat.

To the waitress who appeared with a menu, she said, "I'm not going to eat. I just want something to drink. Oh, a Martini."

At the last moment she had lost her courage to ask for a double.

She sat there in her beautiful green coat, her hair soft and blonde, her face betraying her strain only in an overwide, faintly stricken stare that appeared as loneliness, so that a man, passing, was struck at once by pity and by awe, wanting to speak to her and not daring. She drank half the Martini at once: she lifted the glass without spilling it, and then let the drink sit before her for a long time.

This is the last time I'll ever get caught, she thought. I'll get off this tomorrow and that's the end. I know now. Tomorrow evening I'll call Martin and ask him to take me to a meeting. I've never really listened, really. Forgive me, Robert, I didn't really know. Perhaps you didn't either. The music soothed her into a pleasurable sadness. I have no excuse and so it must be a disease and now it is only a matter of stopping. She was speaking in her mind directly to Robert. My darling, I've never loved anyone else. The

sight of you makes me all soft. What would I ever do, how would I ever live, without you?

She had two more drinks and left and drove home feeling happy. At a drugstore she bought some green gum and chewed it vigorously. Television is a great protector, she thought as she entered the house again.

"I'm home!" she called from the kitchen. "Elaine, did you straighten up your room as I asked you earlier? You're to wear your brown skirt and your orange striped blouse tomorrow, do you hear?"

The resumption of household interests eased her guilt. She set gaily about preparing sandwiches for the light Sunday-night supper, sandwiches that Robert liked, toasted tomatoes, bacon and cheese. Her deception was so deeply hidden that she did not have to strain at it.

"Ah, you're feeling and looking much better," Robert said.

But the following evening when Robert came home from work, Evelyn was sitting on an old couch in the cellar. She had tried desperately during the day to climb up out of her slough. She had tried to gather and bind resolution; she had succeeded only in knotting herself and then loosening the bonds with booze. She had drunk steadily all day but looking at each drink as a separate touchstone, she believed that she had not had much. She had retreated to the cellar at three o'clock when the children came home, telling them she had something to do there, something secretive, hinting at some present, and that she did not wish to be disturbed. Their stares had increased her fright. They knew, she realized. She had already put one of the fifties under the couch in the corner. The other, which was more than half-empty, was beneath her mattress at the head of the bed where the bulge would not show under the pillows.

And so she waited. She did not know why she had come to the cellar for these last hours. Perhaps to retreat as far as possible without actually becoming separated, like the half-hearted attempting suicide. Perhaps, too, for the warm dimness there that might soften the coming blows.

Above her she heard the front door open and she sat waiting her judgment and her punishment. Hastily she reached under the couch, opened the bottle, and took a large drink. Then she sat with her head slightly bowed, quivering now and again as her rigidity was shaken. Several tears ran down her stained face. A strand of hair became loose and it fell in a loop across one cheekbone. She heard low voices, then a stillness that was stretched to a fine, piercing

point. A footstep once more, softly. A creak somewhere in the faraway corners of the house. Then the cellar door above her opening and the heavy downward tread.

She did not look up immediately. The feet and trousered legs came within the downward circle of her vision. Then, as she raised her head, before she saw his face, she cried, "Why did you make me drink?"

"I didn't make you drink, Evelyn," Robert said gently.

Now she saw his face, showing not the bitter aversion with which he had once surveyed her but with the contours in the dimness blunted with pity and with love, the face looking down from far away in the broken lines of sorrow. She lowered her head again.

"No," she said. "You didn't. I would like to believe that, that I drank for you. I'm sorry, Robert."

"Have you been drinking since Friday night?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered. "Since Friday night, trying to stop."

"And yesterday afternoon when you were out?"

"Yes. I wanted to tell you. I was afraid."

"Do you want me to telephone someone to come see you?"

"Yes, Abbie. Her number is in my book. Oh God, I need someone to talk to. I didn't believe it, I didn't really believe it."

"No," he said. "Nor did I. Before, I thought I might be causing it some way. But now there was no reason. Was there any particular reason?"

"No. Just that I thought I could drink a little."

"I'll call Martin, too. I guess I need someone to talk to."

When she heard him reach the kitchen she opened the bottle and took her last drink. She tucked the loop back up into the smooth mass of her hair. She rubbed her eyes with her fists. Then she went up, carrying the bottle with her. She set it in the open on a counter. She entered her bedroom and brought out the second bottle. She began to set the dining-room table.

Martin and Abbie came in shortly after. From the kitchen she heard them talking to Robert. With her face blank she walked into the living-room. Peculiarly, Martin wore a wide grin as he turned to her. He embraced her and kissed her forehead and then raised her face with a knuckle under her chin.

"Ah, baby, baby," he chided gently. "What did you do?"

When Abbie put her arm around her she exclaimed, "Whew! That's the first time I've ever really smelled booze on somebody else. Come on in the kitchen. Is there any coffee?"

Despite her misery Evelyn laughed.

"Oh, Abbie, what a damn fool I've been," she said.

"Isn't it the truth? We always are. But now we'll sweat it out, eh?"

"Yes, oh yes," Evelyn said, feeling the sweet rest of surrender.

## XXXII

### 1

OCCASIONALLY black moods of condescending bitterness would return to Martin. Standing by the front window after breakfast he would watch the rivulets of people trickling down the various streets towards the railroad station as towards a lake whose level was maintained by the releasing gates of the trains. Ah, the fools, the fools, he would think, knowing that in a few minutes he himself would have to leave the house and struggle against being submerged. On days such as these he avoided Alice, who took the same train as he into Boston. He would linger on the fringe of the crowd and board the last car to sit by a dirty window and watch with a frigid loathing the succession of dreary streets, the appalling sameness of every soiled house, the stores blinking obscenely in the overcast morning like whores in cheap jewellery.

He walked down the length of the office past the rows of stenographers and clerks, blonde girls, dark girls, young married women, pretty, homely. Towards the rear of the office, somewhat sheltered by filing cabinets, he found Alice. She was frowning and shuffling some papers. His bitterness now was broken. I should have had daughters, he thought.

Alice looked up and said, "Good morning, Mr. Gray," the way she had heard many of the girls address him.

"Oh, cut it out, Alice," he said. "What are you frowning over, baby?"

"I can't find a letter I'm supposed to have about some carload of burlap."

"Walters, in transportation, has it."

"How do you know?"

"He's a correspondence miser, a file robber. Come, we'll go down for coffee."

"Will it be all right? I mean walking alone with you through the office?"

"Oh, sure. Just act as though we were lovers. If you try to act casual everyone will suspect we are having an affair. I haven't seen Abbie for several days. How is she?"

"All right. We did each other's hair last night."

Martin laughed. "You did, eh?"

"What's funny?"

"I had a vision of two monkeys in a zoo picking each other over."

He took Alice to one end of the long counter where he hoped they wouldn't be pressed by the mid-morning rush.

"I've been trying to imagine how Abbie acts alone," he said. "How she looks when I don't see her."

"Well, she acts like a woman," Alice said. "But she has two big things, staying sober and you. Everything else comes from that. Sometimes she looks like she's dreaming."

"Yes," he agreed quietly.

"She's in love with you."

"I know," he said.

"I couldn't be quiet and waiting like her. I'd have to push it. I think I'd be scared, too, living on the edge of love. Scared I'd start in again if it didn't come off."

"It's difficult to know what to do sometimes," Martin said.

"When the two of you appear, when you come in to a meeting, you act as if you belong to each other, as though you were already married."

"I know," Martin said. "I've been aware of that."

But he was aware, also, of something beyond the appearance--that he felt at times as though he was married, that he was happily conscious of Abbie being within reach always and that when now he touched her arm a new delicious sense of possessing something rare pervaded him and he experienced a considerate pride that was not unwholesome or vain. Yet the very fact that he had known her at both of her extremes, that he had helped her, restrained him from assuming any privilege. The thought of receiving payment was abhorrent and there were times when he wished he had not previously known her so that he could approach her unencumbered with their past association.

For he had become increasingly conscious of her body, both more constantly and more intensely, and he was troubled by the thought that all his effort had been predicted on a desire that was finally no more than a physical selfishness. But everything is, he protested.

I am not Rama Krishna or Saint Somebody. I move on a plane of everyday vexation and temptation and the effort towards purity might cause more damage to others than my being a thoughtless libertine. If Abbie had taken a man he could have pursued her without self-doubt. But she hadn't and wouldn't, and the idea of her doing such a thing now caused him a strange and acute discomfort. What troubled him more than his own struggle to refine and justify his simple need for a woman was the thought that Abbie herself, in a moment of cynicism or disillusion, might believe that taking her to bed had been the final goal all along.

The ease and naturalness of their being together, this appearance of marriage that Alice had noted, was due in great extent to the completeness of Abbie's experience and his complete knowledge of it. The road of excess? And yet it was determined finally by the good that lay underneath the courtship with evil, the basic structure under the decorative and dirty detail.

"Ralph is nice," Alice said after a pause.

"He is a man who will be wounded often by his own desire for love and gentleness and the need to help others."

"But it doesn't have to be that way, does it?"

"I don't know, Alice. I don't know how it has to be. I think, though, that only love will ever allow him his strength."

"He isn't very happy in his marriage, is he?"

"Has he told you anything of it?"

"Oh, no. It's just something you can sense, the sadness and disbelief in himself. But even with that it's nicer to be with him than with these overbearing young products in the office."

"Products," Martin echoed.

When they were back in the office he found he had nothing with which to occupy himself. He had become so rapid in decision and so skilful in distributing his work in small bits to others that he often wished he were less efficient or that he liked the work well enough to linger over it. He stood by a window looking down into the street. I should go away, he thought. Twenty years. Have a doctor give me a certificate that my lungs are weak and then get a six months' leave of absence. And Abbie? He knew instantly with the query that he could not leave her. Take her with me? He allowed himself to fall into a reverie of love and far places. My sentence has been served. I am calm and sober now. Will I stay here where the compressing factors will always be a threat to my integrity and sobriety, or will I seek a new territory where life can be reinvested with dignity and mystery. I will go away. Why should

I feel myself bound? It is only the old alcoholic failure of assuming guilt and then trying to absolve it with a reasoning resentment. No moral or social quandary exists here. I'll go away and take Abbie with me.

2

Martin was not very surprised when Robert called on Monday night. He knew that Evelyn had become so healthy and happy that her alcoholism had receded from any continuous consideration. He knew also, that Robert had remained sceptical, believing that the weakness was something caused by greater distortions and derangements than existed in his house.

"I wouldn't be alarmed by what has happened," Martin said to him when Abbie took Evelyn to the kitchen. "I would feel grateful. Sometimes we need a final blow to convince us."

"I suppose I did," Robert said. "It's so difficult to believe, or perhaps I don't want to believe it. It seems like a failure of some sort."

"Perhaps it is. But when you say of a man that his health has failed you don't condemn him for it. I suppose diseases evolve with our civilization and this one is increasing and becoming more subtle. On my way here I was thinking how fortunate you are, how fortunate any man is who has a beautiful wife in love with him. Do you mind my speaking like this?"

"No," Robert said.

"You see so many marriages all screwed up or dying of dry rot," Martin said. "Marriage. It is a beautiful word. Perhaps the ideal is too pure for us. It needs health, laughter, passion, tenderness, not possessions and idiotic social duties and competition."

"I told her to take the first drink," Robert said.

"Good. You can share the recovery with her."

"You don't think she should go to a hospital?"

"God, no!" Martin said. "She's been drinking only a few days. I don't think she drank any tremendous quantity. She ought to be able to shake out the worst of it in twenty-four hours. Abbie will stay for the night if you want her to."

"No. I might as well learn what it's like. In the past I used to avoid it as much as possible, go in my room and close the door."

"She'll be up and down all night," Martin warned. "Shakes. Maybe dry heaves early in the morning. She'll reach for the bottle a dozen times and pull her hand back. Don't hide it on her because then she'll search until she finds it and then she will drink."

"If I'm with her I don't think she will drink," Robert said. "She was afraid of how I would react. But shall I give her a drink if she gets too bad?"

Martin gave a short painful laugh.

"That's hard for me, an alcoholic, to answer. I have too much sympathy. At any rate ward it off hour by hour as long as possible. Make tea or coffee for her. Talk. Distract her mind as much as possible. Talk about next summer's vacation. Anything to pass more time. If you do finally give her a drink, make it as late in the night as possible and don't give her a little drink. Give her a good big hooker, three or four ounces, and make her get in bed first. It may knock her out so she sleeps a few hours. Will you be home tomorrow?"

"I'll stay home."

"Good. Tomorrow is the important day. If she gets through tomorrow the rest should be easy. If she gets some sleep tonight, take her out for a ride. Kiss her, make love to her, anything so one hour follows another without a drink. Tomorrow evening I'll come down with Abbie. If she's in any shape at all we'll take her to a meeting where no one knows her. She'll be ready to listen more closely now."

Robert was looking down in dismay at the floor.

"Oh hell, it's not all that sorrowful," Martin said. "She really wants to stop. This was just forgetfulness. Supposing she didn't want to?"

"I guess, finally, it's my pride," Robert said. "I resented your knowing her at first, knowing something about her I didn't. I resented the intrusion into my little kingdom."

"Oh," Martin said.

"And the drinking. What I really feared was not so much that Evelyn would be hurt as that the alcohol was stealing my possession of her, that she was being unfaithful to me, not really with a man but as if it were a man."

"She probably had similar fears."

Martin suggested after dinner that Robert go out with him. They stopped at a roadhouse. Robert had a highball and Martin a glass of ginger ale.

"Doesn't this bother you?" Robert asked.

"No. It is alone at night, if booze is within reach, that I might be tempted to drink, thinking that I could go to bed and sleep it off immediately. So I guard against getting in a situation like that—which reminds me of a pint of whisky that has been in my house



for three months. I'll bring it over to you. I respect booze too much to pour it down the sink."

"Do you think it would do Evelyn any good to see a psychiatrist?"

"Lord, no. Some psychiatrist might start digging and get her booze trouble all mixed up with something else. We have a tendency to credit infallibility to the psychiatrist the way we once did to the priest. There are stupid and dishonest priests and I suppose there are stupid and dishonest psychiatrists. Some of them, I think, invent the distortion before the correction. An honest psychiatrist would chase Evelyn out of his office. When she doesn't drink she is a complete woman. We live in a suspicious and sceptical age that is always looking for something wrong. Inverse reasoning is one of the new and subtle diseases, on a par with alcoholism. I am guilty of it often myself. It is one of the main reasons why I plan to go away for a while. I'd like to enjoy without thinking for a while."

"What will Abbie do?" Robert asked.

"Is it that obvious?" Martin asked with a grin.

Robert was embarrassed. "I don't know. I just assumed you were together."

"Yes, I suppose we are."

The act was mine. I cannot deny it, he thought. Even if I wanted, through denial, to inflate humility, I have to accept the fact that she would be dead if I hadn't helped her, and that she would have drunk again if I hadn't given her my support. Even if it was my own need that impelled the act. But now her separateness has grown. What a long time has passed in such a short period. Her face is her own, her body, her thoughts, her love. Sometimes now, if he saw her from across the room, it seemed as if he was looking at a portrait of her so acutely did he feel her separation from him.

"She's quite attractive," Robert said. "But she looks timid."

"Not timid. Startled," Martin said. "She had an extremely difficult time drinking and now she is filled with amazement at being happy and sober."

"And you helped her?"

"Yes, but she helped me. I needed someone who had been hurt worse than myself, someone weaker than I was."

"Not someone stronger?"

"Oh, no. This is a point that makes AA continue to grow and remain healthy, the help the sober man gets from the drunk, the deep gratitude we feel towards those who need us. It was the sinners who made Christ a God. The potter doesn't curse the clay because it has no shape. If it had shape what would he do?"

When Martin and Abbie were ready to leave, Evelyn was in bed. Robert appeared to be happy about something as he came from Evelyn's room.

"We'll be all right, now," he said. "Maybe you'll both come over and spend an evening in a few days?"

"Surely," Martin said. "I'll give you a ring tomorrow to see how Evelyn is."

On the way home he asked Abbie, "What did Evelyn have to say?"

"Nothing, really," Abbie said. "She just thought she could get away with a few drinks and then she got scared and guilty. It's been a good thing for her. Now Robert knows, too."

Abbie laughed without merriment. "I learned something. That married people can love each other. You know, I never believed it."

"Will you come in with me before going to your room?" he asked.

She did not answer.

"I've been at this same job for twenty years, Abbie. I've decided to go away for six months."

"Yes," she said. "I thought something like this might happen."

"Not to escape or evade."

"No."

"To learn, if I can. Some men at my age and with my conditioning might seek a hermitage. Perhaps a monastery. I can't. I can't deny life. If I tried it would be only vanity, a desire to do something different, the destructive longing for perfection. For death, really."

"I don't understand," she said.

"A dry drunk. Spiritual auto-intoxication. God grant that I am never without sin. I wish to remain human."

"Martin, will you go away very soon?" she asked.

"Whenever you are ready."

He heard her sigh and he slowed the car down because his house was near and he wanted her response before the interruption of getting out.

"Ready for what?" she asked.

"To go with me."

"Me?"

"Yes, of course, Abbie."

"Why do you want me to go with you?"

He lifted his hand from the wheel and touched her head in a brief caress.

"Why, because I love you, Abbie," he said. "Why else, now?"

"We would have to live together."

"Yes?" he said.

"We would have to sleep together."

"I should hope so, Abbie. I should dearly hope so."

"And you want me? You long for me?"

"Yes."

"I had begun to feel you might," she said. "I don't know what to do."

Martin turned into his driveway and they entered the house. As he turned towards her after putting on the light he was startled by the look on Abbie's face. It was drawn, sad, and at the same time tense. She seated herself on the divan and turned her face away from him.

"You must know that I am not as strong and self-sufficient as I appear," Martin said. "I have my loneliness and doubt, my bitter times when I resent the very shape of life. I am an alcoholic, too. I want you to come with me for myself, for the support you can give me and for the pleasure of sharing, apart from wanting your love."

"It's not that," she said. "It's myself."

## XXXIII

WHEN she asked, "Ready for what?" she had no idea what Martin had meant. She supposed he might mean when she had been sober long enough to be able to maintain her sobriety without his help. She had felt an almost welcome sadness when he said he was going away. She felt no quick happiness when it became clear he wanted her with him. For several days she had been depressed by the recollection of incidents buried beneath her happiness and called forth by a chance meeting with her second husband.

He had stopped his car beside her when she was on her way to breakfast. At first she had not recognized him. He had become heavier in his face, more flushed and determined, not from dissipation but from the constant need for force and decision in his business and from loss of temper. He stepped from the car and came around to meet her with open surprise and admiration.

"Good God! Abbie!" he said. "What has happened to you? You look all changed, beautiful."

"Hello, Jim," she answered.

"The last time I saw you, you were a wreck. Where are you headed?"

"I'm on my way to breakfast. I work in a store near here."

"You're not married again?" he asked. "It would be some kind of a record."

"No. I'm living alone."

"Here, let me take your coat. You have changed, eating breakfast."

The quick intimacy he was assuming dismayed her. She felt powerless to fend him off. As she stepped from her coat she knew he would be assaying her shape, perhaps receiving a momentary excitement at the thought that this body in all its passionate movement had been his. I can't let the past hurt me now, she thought. I can't do anything about it. It's done. She sought to turn the conversation from her own affairs.

"How is your business going?" she asked.

"Fine! Abbie, I'm making a lot of money. I can afford damn near anything I want. I don't see much of the old crowd. Most of them I've left behind. I built a new home, you know, out in Lynfield. Big deal. Have two kids, too—a boy and girl, four and six."

"You must be very happy," she said. "I'm glad for you."

He asked her where she worked and she knew that he would guess her salary within a few dollars and would know her living expenses and what she could afford. He would see quickly the routine of her life and would be puzzled by the fact that she tolerated it.

"There never was another woman who quickened me like you," he said. "None of them knew what you knew."

"I've learned not to look back at things," Abbie said.

"Oh, that's nonsense. How can you learn anything except from the past? And how can you forget? You remember whether you want to or not."

"I have to go now," Abbie said.

"I'll drive you to work."

"No. I'd rather walk."

"Walk! You are a new woman," he said.

During the day Abbie could not stop her memory from its exhumation, and as the afternoon advanced she became weary and dejected by the weight of evidence against the present, sickened by the lumpish mass of the indigestible accumulation of unsavoury details. But it's done, it's done, she cued to herself. She dreaded the return to her room. Martin was going to a meeting at a state prison,

Alice was staying in town to see a show. She had only a bowl of soup and a cup of coffee for supper. She felt too tired to walk afterward. She began to shake a little as she once had from drinking. She knew she was in a dangerous state. 'At this moment she would have called a taxi to take her to a liquor store if she had not accepted completely her inability to drink. She knew no relief lay in that direction. She knew that if now she had the first drink she would go directly into drunkenness. When she remembered the prescription for seconal that she still carried in her handbag she increased her pace to reach a drugstore quickly. She had the prescription filled and went to her room.

But now with the seconal in hand the urgency left her. She took a shower, got in bed, and put out the light. Gradually her trembling subsided. I have a right to what I have, she thought. It is not much but it is mine. Nothing, nobody, can take it from me. Oh Martin, Martin, I wish you were with me.

But on Monday morning her second husband approached her again as she neared the diner.

"I thought I might meet you," he said.

Somehow she was not surprised at his being there nor at the course his conversation took.

"Rough weekend," he said, after ordering from the waitress. "Everything seemed to go wrong at home. Wound up getting plastered Saturday night, which is something I rarely do, as you know. Oh well, there's no use trying to hide it, Abbie. Edith and I get along best when we're not together. She's always tired when there's something to do for me. All those goddam interests of hers, social work, the women's political club, golf two days a week. Christ, you wonder how we ever managed to elect a president back in the last century the way these club women act. There isn't a good screw in the whole lot of them. Abbie, I need a woman. Not only to take to bed but to have a little fun with."

"Why don't you get one, then?"

"Oh, I don't run around. You know that. And I haven't got time to court someone. How do you know what you'd get, anyway? I don't want to be entangled. How about going out with me some night this week?"

"Oh, I don't go out much now, Jim," she said. "I have to work for a living."

"It could be something more than just a one-night date."

"I've changed in ways you don't know, Jim," she said. "I don't need the things I once thought I needed."

"You mean you'd rather go on working in that dingy store and living alone in a room?"

"If that's all it was, no. It's more than that."

"Look, I'm in a hurry. I've got to get in town. Think it over. I'll drop by tomorrow."

"Wait a minute, Jim," she said. "The answer is no. If you're here tomorrow, I'll go somewhere else to eat."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," he said irritably. "Where do you get off, acting like that? You? With what I know about you? Good-bye."

Her fragile strength broke before his contempt. The humiliation was like an erupting disease. She knew the insult was deserved. But worse was the doubt of her own integrity. Have I been faking all this time? Playing a nice game of being good? Her face seemed to bear an uncovered stain. She walked slowly to the store so that the brand of mortification should cool.

"What is the matter with you?" Mrs. Kershoff asked when she had been at work a half-hour.

"I just don't feel very well."

"A cold, maybe? Feverish?"

"No. Just worried about something."

"Aha! So if you married the man, what should the worry be? It's Monday. Who buys a dress on Monday? Take the day off."

But the few hours with Evelyn, the insight into a marriage so unlike her own, had returned the uncertainty and her sense of being unworthy. Martin was too clean and refined, too concerned with some ultimate reason or rearrangement. As she sat on the divan in his house now the old alcoholic urge to cut and run assailed her. She controlled an impulse to rise. She sat stiffly with her hands clenched in her lap, her back towards the entrance of the dining-room from which he would appear. She could hear him placing cups on saucers in the kitchen.

She heard Martin come into the living-room but she did not turn. She saw his arm slant down into her vision as he placed the cup on the low table before her. She followed his withdrawing arm with her eyes, wanting to seize and cling to it and place her face against the cloth. He turned on a dim wall lamp and snapped out the overhead light without speaking and returned to the corner farthest from her.

"What is it, Abbie?" he asked softly.

"Oh, I saw my second husband twice in the past few days," she said.

"Yes?"

"He wanted to rent an apartment for me. His wife evidently isn't much good in bed. I was to be the grateful substitute."

"Don't wound yourself, Abbie."

"He was simply outraged when I refused his offer. What hurts is that he had a right to expect I would welcome the chance."

"Oh no. He didn't have a right to expect it at all."

"It made me remember things. Martin, you don't know anything about me, just what you found in the hospital. I was married three times and had many lovers."

"I know."

"Everything was in it, lying and stealing and cheating and cruelty, letting one man buy me drinks and then going off with another because he was bigger and stronger. But then when I got real sick for booze I put a price on it to make sure I would have something to drink. The price got lower and I drank cheap wine lots of times. And then sometimes no man wanted me, no man at all, and sometimes there would be a man I didn't even know there, coming out of the haze and the sounds I couldn't quite hear, saying something, sent by someone else."

When she stopped again she was trembling all over. She wanted to reach for her coffee but she knew she would be unable to raise the cup without spilling it. I am killing myself, she thought wildly. He won't want me now. The silence increased. He said nothing.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry that's the way I have been. I'm grateful for your helping me, Martin. A number of times I wanted simply to disappear so that this should not happen. I didn't want you hurt by me. But I couldn't do anything else, could I? What is the use, this looking pretty and wearing nice clothes? What does it hide? Nothing from myself, now nothing from you."

She heard him approaching. She saw his arm reach down again and she recoiled slightly.

"Your coffee is cold," he said. "I'll get you another cup."

She could read nothing in his voice. She would have liked to have wept. God, what have I done? I've thrown it all away. How will I stay sober in the awful, empty night? She was not aware that he had returned until she heard him set the cup down. He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her. When she looked at him he was smiling gently at her.

"But I knew all that, Abbie," he said.

"You knew?"

"It was in your face the first day I saw you. Come, have your coffee. Do you feel better now? Now it's all done, isn't it?"

"Yes. I hope so, Martin."

"And you will go away with me?"

"Yes. If you want me."

"Good Lord, Abbie, you are a beautiful and good woman. I would be an idiot not to want you. This other thing—I am no different from you except that more of my experience remained in my imagination because I lacked the courage or opportunity to act it out. Will you rest with it now?"

"Yes."

He put his hand behind her head and kissed her mouth and she could cling to him now, pressing her face against his chest and letting her hand touch his head and feel his face. It was completely new now, completely honest. There was no hole into which she had to crawl and everything was erased.

## XXXIV

THERE was a half-mile road down through the pines to the lake. It had a steady downgrade and Ralph shut off the motor and let the car roll quietly, hoping to surprise a deer. He had lost count of the amount he had drunk but he was not drunk. The happiness was still with him. He was certain a night's sleep would have him refreshed for the decision and action of the following day, calling the company to resign, calling his wife to tell her he was not coming back and for her to start divorce proceedings.

The car rolled on to the area of grass beside the camp and he turned off the headlights and breathed deeply. The stars were out, reflected in the lake between columns of vapour. He shivered as he came out of the closed heated car. He had not realized it was so cold out. Opening the car door again he drank from the pint and held it briefly against the stars. It was half-filled. He walked through the darkness to the shore and felt the water, surprised at its warmth. I'm here, here, he thought, turning completely around slowly. Here in the quiet night far away. No one knows I'm here and all the struggle is over. The thing is done.

The pint in his coat pocket banged against the side porch rail as he felt his way to the kitchen door. Entering, he struck a match



to screw in the fuses he had removed. The kitchen leaped into hard white reality, furnished but deserted, and he turned curiously as though listening for a sound, perhaps a mouse scurrying away or a creaking from the slight wind. Standing in the middle of the floor he took another drink and listened again, then shrugged. What? The lonely end? The beginning. The beginning again alone. There was a gentle humming in his ears. His face was hot. With an increased urgency he turned the living-room light on and made a fire in the wood stove. The flames sounded in the upright black pipe. He snapped on the radio and went into the bedroom to spread the folded blankets and turn down the sheet.

Suddenly he turned and went outdoors again. Yes, the night was there and the protecting distance and the absolute silence, all of it confirming the separation. It is finished. Gratefully he looked up at the stars, turning slowly to see the whole of the heavens, the great forever-reaching space that was the final release. Far across the lake a single light burned. What is it I know? he wondered. What is it I have felt that no one else has ever felt? Softly the wind hummed in the pines and gently rattled the clinging dead leaves of an oak. He opened his car door and took out the bottle of sherry and returned indoors.

The heat struck him full force and returned him to his immediate surroundings and plans. Now for some sleep. He would get up early and take a walk. Then he would study his property carefully, laying out the improvements. What time was it? The electric clock in the kitchen was wrong, of course. He had no watch. What did it matter? He undressed and put on some pyjamas he had left in the bureau. He had another drink and put the pint beside the bed.

The sun was quite bright when he awoke a third time, between drinks, to voices from the living-room. It was the radio. He sat erect suddenly, hung his head a moment, then abruptly leaned from the bed to reach for the sherry that was on the floor. With some fright, for the label hid the contents, he raised the bottle and then breathed softly. It was better than half-filled. He lit a cigarette and began coughing harshly, reaching into his pyjama pocket for a handkerchief into which to spit the phlegm that came into his mouth. His lungs felt congested. His face was beginning to show his beard which was to a great extent grey. His cheeks and forehead were ruddy, his eyes not fully open. Thursday, he thought. What time was it? He threw the bed clothes partially off and hesitated. It was nine o'clock probably. Saturday, he thought. He breathed heavily. I need more sleep. I still feel it. The camp was cold and silent in the morning

brightness. I can call right after lunch. Lunch. I'll have to eat. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply again. The bottle was still in his hand. He unscrewed the cap, drank a half-pint of the wine, set the bottle down again. Then he pulled the covers up and let himself fall back heavily.

It was noontime when he awoke again. With an appearance of rather calm purpose he rose and dressed in some old clothes. He changed his wallet and keys and handkerchief from his good suit, put on a plaid jacket, and got into his car.

He did not think very much on his way into town. Everything seemed remote. Once he stopped and took a drink of the sherry he had brought with him. He did not seem to be hearing quite distinctly. Thursday, he thought again. A field he passed looked brilliantly, painfully green. At this time of the year? They plant something late. He drove slowly. There was a parking space almost in front of the state store. The lists were posted on the wall with prices. He was not worried about prices. He wrote out a slip for two fifths of one hundred proof bourbon. He had trouble following the brand number across the name to the price and then doubling the price for the total. He was not at all shaky, just a little numb, rather veiled and pre-occupied in appearance. It took him a few minutes to locate the section of sherries among the list of wines. He wanted the sherry for that time when he would not require anything as strong as bourbon.

On the way back to the camp he found himself intolerably thirsty. Not only was his throat dry but his skin felt parched. He could not be dehydrated so quickly. It was something else. Possibly a cold. He stopped the car and entered a grocery store.

"I'll have a dozen bottles of beer," he said.

"Small ones?" the proprietor asked.

He hesitated only briefly before replying, "Large ones."

"What kind?"

"Oh, any kind. They're all the same. And give me two small bottles. Have you an opener? Make the small ones cold."

There was a mechanical quality to his movements now, as though the placing of the beer on the car seat, the opening of the door, the insertion of the ignition key, were all acts that had been rehearsed in a precise manner. In the car he opened a bottle of beer and drank it without stopping the car. When he reached the camp he drank the second small bottle, sitting in the car and staring at the lake.

In the shack he turned the radio on once more, got a bottle of

the bourbon, and went into the bedroom. He took a good big belt of whisky before lying down. He felt very tired.

It was black when he awoke. He was very drunk. He fumbled for the bottle but couldn't find it and when he stumbled a few steps to the light switch and turned around he was surprised to find the bottle standing right there on the floor half-empty. He could not remember having awakened and drunk any of it. He staggered a little going into the kitchen. No more whisky, he thought. Beer. I'll eat something. He ate some pieces of salami and cheese and a half-slice of unbuttered bread. He drank a quart of beer. He was shivering again. I can't do anything now. It's too late. He went back to bed, leaving the kitchen light on to shine across the living-room in case he wanted to get up for something. He smoked a cigarette sitting on the bed. His hand was shaking. He took a drink from the bottle and got under the covers. He had not undressed.

Now in the semi-darkness his mind loosened suddenly into a flow of words. The drunkenness was complete. "I am drunk. Drunk," he said aloud. Nothing disturbed the block of silence. How did it happen again, he thought. I didn't want it to happen. How am I going to get out of this one? "What does it matter?" he whispered. "To hell with it!" he shouted. I didn't have the courage, the courage to change the things I can. I have been a coward.

He staggered from the bedroom into the living-room door to the porch where he clung to a post, urinating. His body twisted and still clinging to the post he half-fell on the shallow steps. He walked a few paces away in the darkness and looked up at the sky, shivering, then he felt his way back, staggering against the door jamb, leaning heavily against the door as it closed. He opened the bottle on reaching his bed. One more and I'll sleep, he thought.

"Tomorrow is the day," he said. Tomorrow has a special significance. Tomorrow you shake it out. Oh God, tomorrow. Why? Why again? "Well, that's the way it is," he said out loud in a reasonable tone. "Isn't that the way it is?" he asked and listened. Well? I had to get drunk to make the change, to force it. If I hadn't got drunk I'd be home in bed now. He took another drink and coughed and almost retched the drink up again.

I am lost in the night. No one knows I'm here. I could die here, as if who gives a dam. There is still another fifth and the wine and the beer and what's left of this. The radio. He lurched only once finding it and turning it on and returning to bed. It was sleep he needed, he told himself again. Then the first thing in the morning he would head back and find Martin. "I need Martin," he said.

He is my friend. He is my only friend. I'll go back to AA with him. I'll sit at a meeting with him. But I can't go home. Oh God, I can't go home. If I have to die, I won't go home. Why haven't I had the dry heaves? I haven't been drinking for three months. I won't be as sick this time.

And once more as he lay propped up, listening to an uninterrupted programme of sentimental music that had been popular years ago, a sort of misty happiness returned to him, a peace that hovered before his subsiding consciousness. It will all turn out all right, he thought. Somehow.

The sunlight was too painful when he awoke. The task ahead was too monumental, the skeins of his life too entangled. He believed it was Saturday morning and he knew he could not meet Alice. Gone, he thought. I couldn't stay sober even for that. I can't think. I need more sleep before I can think.

It was dark and it was light again. The beard on his face itched, his eyes were sticky, his skin seemed flaked. There were empty beer bottles standing about the floor beside the bed. He still wore his old clothes. His shoes were on. Though there was still a little left in the fifth he hunted for the sherry. It was not on the kitchen table or under the sink or in the wood box. At last, thinking very carefully, he lifted the mattress and found the bottles there. Immediately he drank some. It tasted so much better than the whisky, he thought. It was mild. That was what he needed, a milder drink.

Again it was dark when he awoke. "Martin," he called. "Why doesn't someone come?" he asked. "Oh, please, please, come," he cried pitcously. "Will no one come? Jesus Christ!" he shouted in anger. "Won't someone come? I need help, help." And he drank more, hoping that someone would come, and hiding the bottles under the mattress in case someone would come and listening, listening, for a knock on the door before he fell into a coma.

When he did finally hear the voice that was not the radio his eyes were shut and the voice was from a great distance and confusing because it sounded from an area unrelated to his dreams. Pain awoke him. When he opened his eyes a man was staring down at him and slowly the man smiled.

"Are you with me?" he asked. "I had to slap you awake"

Shrewdly he did not answer. He lay looking up through his inflamed narrow eyes, shaking a little, trying to fit the man into some sequence. There was none. He closed his eyes again.

"Have you had enough?" the man asked.

Ralph did not answer for a moment. A strange fear made him

struggle now to answer intelligently. He smiled and opened his eyes.

"What are you, a Republican?" he asked.

The man laughed. "That's good. Wake-up with a joke. My name is Al."

"Okay, Al," he whispered.

"Here. Take a shot. Can you hold the bottle? Sit up a minute. I want to talk to you. I've got some coffee on. I'll bring you a cup in a minute. How long have you been here, Ralph?"

"Wednesday?" he said.

"Do you know what day it is?"

"Saturday morning."

"It's Sunday morning."

"It's too late, then," he said.

"What's too late?"

"Everything. Everything's too late."

Ralph struggled to a sitting position. His head vibrated from side to side.

"You may be right," Al said. "Here. Take the shot. There's no use getting the shakes here."

Ralph raised the bottle with both hands and drank.

"Look, I want to get you into a hospital. Will you go?"

"What hospital?" he asked suspiciously.

"A general hospital. I'll stay there with you till your friend Martin gets here. I already telephoned him you were going."

"Martin," Ralph said.

He began to weep. He wept for Martin because he had gotten drunk. He wept for himself, for all his own misery.

## XXXV

### 1

EARLY on Sunday morning Martin received a phone call from Abbie. He was surprised to hear her voice since she had planned to see him later in the day.

"Martin," she said, "Alice had a date with Ralph last night. He didn't show up and he didn't call her. She sat there waiting for two hours."

"Oh, Lord," he said. "I'm thinking the same thing you are. But he seemed to be all right Wednesday night."

"Alice is all upset. Not about being stood-up on the date, but worrying about him. At least he would have called if he had backed out or had been unable to keep the date."

"Yes," Martin paused. "What do I do now? Listen, why don't you and Alice walk down here? We can have some breakfast together or coffee if you've already eaten. In the meantime something will occur to me."

When he hung up he sat thinking for a moment. It was nine o'clock, early for a Sunday-morning call. He went upstairs to get dressed, disturbed, quite certain that Ralph was drinking. It was almost an AA axiom: if you are not happy sober, you'll will get drunk again. Yet Ralph must have been a little cheerful about going out with Alice. Something must have upset him, probably something at home. There was only one thing to do, talk with Ralph. As soon as he was dressed, despite his loathing to intrude where he had no definite knowledge of the situation, he dialled Ralph's number. The phone rang repeatedly. Was he avoiding the phone? Martin did not hang up. Finally he heard the sound of the receiver being lifted.

"Hello," a woman's voice said faintly.

"Mrs. Hilton? Martin Gray. I'm sorry to call you this early. Is Ralph there?"

"No."

"Well, do you know where I can locate him?"

"No," the voice said again.

Martin hesitated. Mrs. Hilton offered no explanation but she did not hang up. Oh, to hell with it, let her insult me if she pleases, he thought.

"Mrs. Hilton, what is the trouble?" he asked.

"I'd rather not talk."

"Is it all right if I drop around?"

There was a silence and then she said, "Yes."

"I'll be there in fifteen or twenty minutes."

He hung up before she might object or delay. In a few moments Alice and Abbie came in. He told them of his conversation.

Mrs. Hilton opened the door before Martin had a chance to ring the bell. She wore pyjamas and a house coat. She had made up her face and fixed her hair.

"Take off your coat and sit down," she said. "I don't know where Ralph is. Probably drunk somewhere. He went flying out of here

Wednesday night and I haven't seen him since. If he had any regard for his children he would have called no matter what he thinks of me, but he thinks only of himself."

Martin smiled sorrowfully at her. For once he was at a loss for words. Like most alcoholics he had a tendency to blame another alcoholic in any marital disagreement. Yet he knew Ralph.

"Was he drinking then?" he asked.

"Well, he certainly wasn't acting normal."

"Maybe he felt a little proud not drinking," Martin said.

"Well, he shouldn't have. It's his job to support his home and his family like everyone else and stay sober. Other husbands around here don't act like him."

"You have no idea where I can locate Ralph?"

"No. His company was telephoning all day Thursday and Friday. He hasn't been working. I've been driven crazy by that phone. What could I tell them? I told them not to call any more. His job is gone, I'm sure."

"He wasn't very happy with the job, was he?"

"It was a job. I'm not always happy washing dishes and keeping a house clean all the time."

"You have a nice home," Martin said.

"Yes, and he don't seem to appreciate it. This time I'm not going to be so easy with him. I've tried that. When he comes back it will be with a new understanding."

"You think he will come back?" Martin asked.

"Well, of course. We've been married all these years. What else would he do? Who else would want him?"

"I think the important thing now is to find out where he is and if he's sick," Martin said. "He's mentioned your camp to me several times. Do you think he might have gone there?"

"I don't know. Maybe. His camp. He thinks more of that camp than he does of his home. Only a short time ago he went up there alone and simply left a note that he had gone. That's what I've had to put up with."

"Well, I was planning on taking a long drive today," Martin said. "Can you tell me where the camp is? Maybe I'll be able to drop by."

"It's on Green Lake off Route Three. Our name is on a sign at the road leading off from the highway."

Martin stood up.

"I'm sorry things are this way," he said. "Maybe they'll straighten out all right."

When the door closed behind him, Martin breathed deeply. The poor woman, he thought. She has no conception at all of her own intense selfishness. He drove home rapidly.

"I want to make a phone call right away," he said as he entered. He picked up the phone and dialed long distance. "I'd like to get the police department in Laconia, New Hampshire," he told the operator. "I'll speak to anyone."

While he was waiting he tried to shake himself loose from his topcoat. Abbie came and helped him.

"I have a hunch Ralph may be at his camp," he said. "Hello? I'm calling long distance for some information. A friend of mine who is an alcoholic is drinking up your way. I wonder if you could give me the name and telephone number of a member of Alcoholics Anonymous in Laconia. I am a member myself."

"Wait a minute. I'll ask around," the police officer said.

"He's asking someone," Martin said to Abbie and Alice. "Ralph had an argument at home and left Wednesday night after the meeting."

"Okay. Here's a number to call," the police officer said. "Ask for Al."

"Thank you," Martin said, writing down the number. "Abbie, will you bring me a cup of coffee? Long distance?"

A man's voice answered the number he called.

"Al?" Martin asked.

"Yes," the voice answered softly and cautiously.

"I'm an alcoholic. Am I talking to the right man?"

"I guess so," Al said with a short laugh that Martin echoed.

"Listen, Al. My name is Martin Gray of the Deering, Massachusetts, group. We have a new member who I think may be drinking up your way. His name is Ralph Hilton and he has a camp on Green Lake off Route Three. His name is on a marker where the road to the camp turns off. He's been gone since Wednesday night and if he's on a bender he's in tough shape by now. Would it be too much to ask you or someone else to take a run over there and see how he is, if he is there?"

"No. I'll take a run over," Al said.

"You won't have any trouble with him. Tell him I asked you to look him up. Will you give me a call back as soon as you know how he is? Have you got a pencil? Here's the number. Deering 2-0714. Do you have it?"

"I have it. What do you want me to do if he's in rough shape? He may be bad if he's been on a bender for four days without eating."



"Can you get him in a hospital up there?"

"Not in the alcoholic hospital. He's not a resident. But we have a doctor here who takes a special interest in alcoholics. He can get him into a general hospital."

"Thank you," Martin said. "It's a lousy job for you on a Sunday morning."

"Oh well, I'm sober," Al said. "That's the important thing for me. Easy does it, boy."

Martin turned from the phone.

"Well, so now we wait for a call," he said. "I hope Ralph is at his camp."

"Do you want some breakfast?" Abbie asked. "I'll get it for you. Alice and I have had ours."

"Fine," Martin said. "I can't help feeling a little responsible about Ralph."

"Why?" Alice asked.

"Well, at Greenleaf Hill he wanted to call up his boss and tell him where he was. Actually, he wanted to get fired. He wanted a radical change of some sort. I convinced him to delay a while, thinking he could work things out better after he was sober a while. But I didn't know his wife. He's been living in purgatory ever since."

"You can't take on the blame for his wife," Alice said.

"No."

"Maybe I see him differently from you," Alice said. "He's not weak, really. He has no one to use his strength for."

Martin smiled at her and Alice looked away. The phone call from Al came an hour later. He had arranged to have Ralph admitted to a hospital.

"I'll come along as soon as I can," Martin said.

"The hospital likes a sober alcoholic to stay with a patient as much as possible the first twenty-four hours to see how he's going to turn out," Al said. "I'll wait there till you get here."

Martin looked across the room at Abbie. He wanted to ask her to come with him but whereas he once would have made the request without compunction, certain that she would blend her wish with his, he now felt constrained to let the suggestion come from her.

"Ralph is on his way to the hospital," he said. "Drinking since Wednesday night."

"Are you going to leave right away?" Abbie asked.

"Yes."

"I'll go along with you if you want company."

"I'd like to go too," Alice said. "I'd like to see Ralph. Maybe I can cheer him up a little."

"He won't be at his best," Martin warned.

"I wasn't either when he first saw me."

Martin began laughing a little.

He heard Abbie rinsing the cups and saucers in the kitchen.

"Go ahead out to the car. I'll bring Abbie along in a minute," he said.

She was drying her hands when he entered. He was carrying her coat that had been lying on a dining-room chair and he held it out for her and then turned her to face him.

"It's nice you want to come," he said.

"Oh, I stick like plaster," she said, looking up and down again.

"We'll stop somewhere to eat on the way up. All right?"

He put his hands inside the coat and held her close and kissed her. She opened her eyes when he lifted his face, then she gave a little laugh of surprise and pleasure and put her face down against his chest.

"Hold me a minute, Martin," she said.

"Well, not too long," he cautioned. "I used to be able to look at you and think big thoughts but now you're a threat to my composure."

"It's nice," she said. "Just to stand close like this."

"Poor Ralph. This is what he wants, really. Simply to love and be loved, and to somehow re-invest the small acts of living with dignity and wonder. It's what I need too, Abbie."

"I don't need anything but you, Martin."

## 2

The shades of the room were partially drawn and the dimness had the density of dust. Through the door Martin saw only a single upright chair with a man sitting on it. The man was partially bald and he had his hands folded on his crossed legs. In profile his face was expressionless, neither listening nor anticipating. His suit was wrinkled and a point of his shirt collar curled upward. His shoes were unpolished but not soiled. His socks were garish. A bit of one shin was exposed. He sat motionless, with an air at once of alertness and relaxation. Ah, he is one of the true ones, Martin thought.

"Al," he called softly.

The man turned his head without surprise and then quietly rose and came out into the hall.

"I'm Martin."

"Hello, Martin," Al put his hand out. ,

"How is he?"

"Well, he walked in under his own power, but he's been punishing it. Right now he's sleeping, moaning a little now and then. The doctor gave him some shots. He's been asleep for over an hour."

"Did you have any trouble with him?"

"No, he wanted to come. He was all fogged up but now and then he'd come out of it. He'll be all right. Poor bastard, he's had a lot of trouble at home, eh?"

"Yes," Martin said. "I don't think his staying sober is going to help it, either."

"It's the big hitch, isn't it?" Al said. "The wisdom to know the difference. To know what we can change and what we have to put up with. Well, all we can do is ask for it."

Martin walked into the room. Above the bed a glass jug of pale fluid hung. A tube led down from it to a needle penetrating the big vein in Ralph's arm that was strapped to a padded board. The fingers of the arm, as if by their own volition, moved slightly. Al hadn't mentioned that he was being fed intravenously. Martin restrained a gasp when he looked at Ralph's face. The eyes were closed and they looked as if they had been closed by blows. The nose that was normally straight and slender was swollen, the nostrils distended. A four days' growth of beard had erased the lines of his moustache and the greyish mixture of the hair, together with the pouched eyes and the angry, slapped colour of the skin, made the face look aged and accidental, with a complete loss of character, like an item over-used and discarded. There was nothing to be seen in the face but the matter of which it was composed. Martin turned away and went back down the hall past the room where the respectably ill were being visited by fluent hope. He found Abbie and Alice in the waiting-room.

"Ralph's asleep," he said. "Abbie, I've never asked you. Can you drive?"

"I can, but I lost my licence."

"I have a licence," Alice said.

"Look, here are my keys. Take a ride around for a couple of hours. Have some coffee or ice cream. I'll stay here. Lord knows how long he'll sleep but he may wake up and try to get out of bed or thrash around. All right? I'll see you later."

Now he took the position in the grey dimness that Al had had. He sat without movement for a long time. A nurse came in, nodded at him, and took a look at Ralph. The only sound within the room was an occasional low moan. The nurse returned, pulled the needle from Ralph's vein, and released the arm from the board. Automatically the arm doubled slowly and then fell across Ralph's chest. The nurse faded from the room. The particled greyness lay in vast silence. And to Martin now some new appreciation of dimensions and meaning was given, a knowledge of living transposition and interchangeability, so that he knew himself in his inmost heart as inseparable from Ralph and from this room and from the space that filtered through the darkening walls. He had now the illusion of speaking from slightly behind himself, of standing there with his hand on his own shoulder.

"What is this man but God?" he asked. "He is good and he suffers. I am driven to acknowledge that everything is God or everything is meaningless. He is at once the vanquished and the victor, the punished and the rewarded, and there remains only the opening outward and the wide, encompassing acceptance of God as all. To love God thus until the paradox is dissolved."

He rose quietly, leaving the touch of his own hand, and walked to the bed where he stood staring down at the wrecked face. He put his hand on the hot, flushed forehead, feeling the clammy sweat, and withdrew it as Ralph's eyes opened and peered at him.

"Martin?"

"Yes," he said.

"Can I have a cigarette?"

Ralph raised a trembling hand towards the package but Martin extracted one and put it between his lips. He struck a match. Ralph inhaled and lifted the cigarette away, holding it in his shaking hand over the side of the bed.

"I did it, Martin," he said.

"Yes."

"I didn't mean to."

"No."

Ralph closed his eyes and opened them again.

"Will I be all right, Martin?"

"Yes."

"I can't go home, Martin," he whispered. "I can't go home. I wanted to but I couldn't. I couldn't change it. I don't know how. What have I done, Martin? Did I do anything to anyone?"

"No. Don't worry about anything now. Don't let the shame bother

you. It might have been me. When you're better in four or five days you can come down to my house and we'll work something out. All right? Alice came along to see you."

"Alice? Oh God."

"It's over for you, Ralph, the way it was for me. Can you be a little happy with the thought? That it's ended now and that you can live sober and happy as you've wanted to?"

"Yes."

When Ralph appeared to be asleep once more, Martin went down the hall. On the way he met the nurse on duty.

"Is he all right?" she asked.

"Yes. He woke up and he's sleeping again."

"I haven't had any experience with alcoholic patients. You hear all sorts of things. Right now he's under sedation. What about later?"

Martin smiled at her.

"Some alcoholics do get wild," he said. "But Mr. Hilton is a gentle man. He won't get the D.T.'s, either. He'll shake and sweat and he may get up and walk around, but he won't be violent. Just talk normally to him. Ask him to do things, don't order him to. All right? I have two friends who will stay with him now and then. I'll come back. Oh, by the way, the friends are women."

The waiting-room was deserted except for Alice and Abbie.

"Do you two want to go in now?" Martin asked. "Ralph's asleep again. I should go out and call Mrs. Hilton."

"Here's your keys," Alice said. "Take Abbie with you. I'll sit with Ralph alone till you get back."

On the broad shallow steps of the hospital, in the first clear coldness of the night, Martin felt exhilarated and joyful.

"Stars," he said. "Look at the bloody stars now, Abbie. It's cold, baby, cold." He grabbed her arm and ran down the steps and stopped. "Hug me, baby," he said. He kissed her and put his nose and mouth down between her neck and coat collar, seeking warmth.

"What is it, Martin?" she asked, fondling his head.

"Everything is glorious, Abbie. I'm happy for Ralph. I'm happy for myself. And you? Ah, you. Come, get in the car."

"Let me put my hands inside your coat," he said when they were sitting inside. "Kiss me, Abbie."

"What has happened to you?"

"Everything and nothing. I am released. We'll have to stay here at least till tomorrow evening. Will you take a room with me, Abbie? Will you let me take you to bed?"

"Whatever you want, I want too."

"Will you love me, Abbie? Will you fall asleep in my arms?"

"After," she said. "I'll fall asleep after."

"And we'll wake up together?"

"Oh yes, Martin," she said.

## X XXVI

WHEN she returned to the trailer Helen found the detective sitting on the studio couch. He had lighted a cigar and had removed his hat and he looked toadlike and sleepy with the flesh beneath his relaxed head forming a double chin that rested on his necktie. She said nothing.

"It must get on your nerves living cooped up like this in a trailer," the detective said.

"Oh, there's only the two of us. We're not as big as you. It's cosy."

"Yeah, cosy," he said. "Will your husband be back soon?"

"I suppose so," Helen said. "He has to eat before going to work."

"Been down to Lynn lately?"

"No. We don't run down much. Davey works evenings. At the motel here, tending bar."

"Been to see his father anywhere?"

"His father?" Helen exclaimed. She laughed and turned away to heat some water for instant coffee. "That's a joke."

"Yeah? What's a joke?"

"They haven't spoken to each other for seven or eight years. They hate each other."

"Why?"

Helen turned and looked at him.

"Davey's mother hung herself when he was twelve. He found her."

"Oh."

"I know everything there is to know about Davey," she said.

"What did you want to see him about?"

"His father skipped. We're looking for him."

"Skipped? Skipped for what?" Helen asked.

"A matter of some missing funds. I don't know the details."

She could not help laughing, from a sense of relief and because David's father had always been a figure of self-proclaimed virtue.

"Oh, boy," she said with relish. "That's good."

"Is it? I don't laugh at things like that. Listen. I'm going down to this motel. I'll have something to eat there and talk to him when he comes in."

"Okay," Helen said. "You're wasting your time. He won't know anything."

"Wasting time I'm good at."

"Enjoy your dinner."

She had her coffee and now and then she shook her head in delighted disbelief. So, she thought. Well, you never know. Maybe all these years he's been keeping someone and he ran short. The good are only good as long as they are not found out. She forgot about the detective until she heard a sharp knock on the door and he entered. He was obviously angry.

"What are you giving me?" he demanded. "Your husband was at work when I came. You telephoned him."

"So?" Helen said. "If you had told me what you wanted you would have saved time. How did I know what you were looking for?"

"You fool around, you'll get in trouble," the detective said.

"Trouble. What's trouble?" Helen asked, shrugging.

She telephoned Martin's house at seven o'clock but there was no answer. She called again with the same result at eleven.

Oh, well, she thought, he'll go somewhere else or maybe come back late. She felt sleepy. It had been so long since she had been in bed early that stretching out alone now was a pleasure. She sprawled widely on the bed and fell asleep. In the morning she awoke several times and fell asleep again. It was ten o'clock before she got up finally and made some coffee. Davey should be here soon, she thought. What a kick he's going to get out of this.

The detective did not show up that morning nor did David. She telephoned the motel and found out that he had not reported for work. On returning to the trailer she sat for some time looking expressionlessly out the end window at the scrub pine. She was certain now that David had started to drink. She did not know how she would feel when David showed up. The laughing cynicism that had carried her along was somehow missing. She had grown weary of it. She was physically exhausted from the irregular hours of eating and sleeping. These months had offered no peace, only a con-

the usual effort to thwart a true recognition of themselves. Nothing had been put in the place of booze, she acknowledged, no first step towards poise and stability had been taken.

At six o'clock she called Martin's house and reached him.

"I haven't seen Davey," Martin said. "Yesterday I went directly from work to see Ralph and didn't get back till one in the morning."

She listened without comment to Martin's account of Ralph.

"I guess Davey is off on one, too," she said. The spoken admission brought a deep sense of failure to her. "I can't do anything about it," she said. "I don't know where he is and I haven't a car to go looking. Isn't it ironic or something that his father's crime should have started him running again? We've got to get away from here. We've got to get far away."

"Do you know where he would be apt to drink?" Martin asked.

"Well, before coming here we always drank around Lynn. But he might be held up in a motel."

"Do this," Martin said. "Come down here by train. Leave a note that you are coming here and that we are looking for him and for him to keep telephoning me. We can go over to Lynn and take a look around."

"I don't know. I think I ought to stay here. He might show up and need help. Listen, Abbie knows all the places around Lynn. Maybe she'd take a ride with you and look for him."

Martin was silent a moment.

"No," he said. "I don't want to take Abbie around there. Give me the names of the places and I'll go alone."

"Don't worry," he said, after she had told him where to look. "The worst that can happen is that he's drunk somewhere. I'll go along the turnpike, too, in case he's checked into a motel there. Will you be all right yourself?"

"Oh, I won't drink. I know if I drink it will be the last time. Martin, I've got to get my son back. How am I going to start? And now Davey's gone again. I can't go on this way. I can't go on cracking jokes instead of living. I thought that just by staying sober things would change. They haven't, Martin. We don't eat right, we don't sleep right, and even love has gotten to be stale. And look at Abbie, the worst of us all. Look at how she has changed and become happy."

"Yes," he said.

"I told Davey the last one was the final one. Well, if he comes back and continues, I'll have to leave him. I can't kill myself for



him and these last months we've been slowly dying. I can see it now I'm alone."

"You know Davey wouldn't harm you intentionally," Martin said.

"I know. He suggested my going away. That's why I haven't been able to. But I've got to get a job or something. My life has to take on some kind of shape. I've got to know that sometime things will be different."

"Take it easy, Helen," he said. "Wait till this thing resolves and then come down and we'll talk it over."

"I can't let his father kill me. I don't belong to his damn family."

"Don't despair," he said. "It's all part of it, Helen, part of God. We learn a little each time, don't we? You and I and Ralph and Evelyn and Abbie. Davey's lost down a little bypath, that's all. But he carries his love with him. Sometimes maybe it's too big a burden for him and he doesn't know what to do because he feels he doesn't deserve it. Go and rest now, Helen. All you can do is wait. When you go to bed, you've done the best you could for the day."

"All right, Martin," she said.

She was strangely at peace as she returned to the trailer. She lay in the darkness listening to some music for a long time, then she went to bed.

She called Martin early in the morning. He had discovered no trace of David in Lynn. The bartenders who knew him had not seen him. His car had not been parked at any of the motels along the turnpike. She went through that day and the next in a sort of placid suspension, reading, eating, listening to the radio. She took several walks into the woods and in her gentle sadness the trees and the sunlight seemed to offer consolation. How strange it all seemed, the loneliness and the silence. She had never been alone. She had always fended off silence. Let us change, she thought, let us find something new. It all seemed so old and worn and dirty, the cocktail lounge and the loud voices, the juke box, the stale smell of the car, even the last long note of the trumpet. In bed it was comfortable alone and she remembered Martin's words: You've done what you could for the day. She did not recognize the gratitude she felt.

On the fifth day there was a notice from the Manchester Police Department in her mailbox. Their car had been parked for two days and two nights on Elin Street and had been towed away.

## XXXVII

THE puzzling thing was the location of the rear wall. It appeared to be the termination of a doorless corridor of some length and yet it loomed up in all its immediate, undeniable solidity when he took several steps. He retreated and approached the wall a number of times and always the same sudden shrinkage of distance occurred. And then he would hear his name whispered and he would turn to the side wall in a motion he thought was swift but was like that of an old man turning to look back.

"Martin?" he said.

But then the whisper seemed around a little further behind him and the tone had changed.

"Helen?"

There was never any answer to his response and each time he called his trembling increased its rhythm and then subsided in the silence that echoed and reverberated in the cell.

"Davey, Davey."

He turned to the rear wall without rising from the boards.

"Martin?" he said.

Finally he had found him. He saw his face down the corridor to the rear wall, his face only in the receding dimness, tilted slightly forward in a bow, like the hanging head of God.

"What is it?" he whispered, disturbed at the air of peaceful suffering on Martin's face.

He rose once more, slowly, uncertain that he was quite upright yet, and went down the corridor. Again the wall materialized abruptly and he felt for Martin's face but it was not there.

"Oh, Martin," he said with gentle reproach, and he heard a sound that was his own teeth chattering together like bony old women complaining endlessly. Fear pushed him upright and he crossed the cell and looked now around the toilet bowl. He could see nothing, so he knelt and felt all about. Now he heard loud voices and he pulled himself erect and stood facing the bars of the cell door, his jaw trembling rapidly. He knew his jaw was shaking too much and he put his hand there to still it for he wanted to look quite reasonable and completely confident.

"How does he look to you?" one of the policemen said.

"He's having D.T.'s, that's sure. But he's not going violent."

"How do you know he won't? What the hell are we going to do with him?"

"Leave him there till Monday morning. What the hell else can you do?"

"Ship him up on the hill."

"Not me. I don't know who he is. He must have lost his wallet. All I know is he said his name is Hutchison and I don't believe that. He wouldn't say where he lived. He don't look like a bum, even dirty as he is."

"Christ, he's shaking. He ought to have a doctor give him a shot of something."

"Doctor Morton is away till Monday noon. I'm not going to call a doctor from another town at this hour of the night to come see a drunk in jail."

"I'm sick," David said, suddenly.

"You sure are, boy."

"Christ, give him a shot of booze, anyway."

"What time is it?" David asked.

"Half-past one."

The words were like a blow and he reeled slightly and slumped to the boards. If he had said four, even. The sun came at six, didn't it? There was a spot of egg yolk on his dirty white turtle-neck sweater and he became absorbed for some minutes in scraping it off with his thumbnail.

"Davey?"

It was Helen this time but he was not going to look. They knew where he was. They knew he would not be leaving.

"I'm here in a cell," he said.

There was no use trying to fake it. He did not know how he came to be there, only he did not want his father to find out, or Helen's mother.

"Helen?"

She did not answer and when he turned to look she must have gone somewhere, perhaps outside. He rose and thrust his face between the bars, catching the metal on both cheek bones, turning his eyes sideways to look along the blank wall leading away.

"Helen!" he shouted, and listened.

The metal was cool on his flushed face. He lifted his face away and looked up and down the bars and replaced it more tenderly between the black columns.

"Helen?" he called softly.

The policeman came along the hall and stood off silently, looking at him, blinking his eyes slowly.

"Is she out there?" David asked.

"No one's here, boy. Who is Helen?"

"My wife. She was just here."

"Take it easy, boy. I'll have a drink for you in a while as soon as the other guy gets back."

"Will it take long?" David asked.

"That's for coming now."

The two policemen appeared. One of them had a fifth with a paper cup. He poured a little whisky into the cup.

"Christ, give him a big shot," the other policeman said. "Maybe it will knock him out till morning. That ought to be enough. Can he hold it?"

"I can hold it," David said.

The policeman set the cup on the floor and pushed it with his toe through the six-inch clearance at the bottom of the bars.

"Thanks," David said, stooping and reaching with both hands for the cup. Four ounces, he thought, as he watched the whisky coming up slowly towards his mouth. He swallowed it in one shuddering gulp.

"All right, lie down on the boards there and try to sleep," the policeman said.

He obeyed. He lay flat on his back with his eyes staring up and his mouth open, his feet falling away from each other. His eyes closed, and spasmodically he pulled a leg up and thrust it out again. When his eyes opened once more after an hour and he had pushed himself up to a sitting position, he knew where he was and the exact dimensions of his cage. He rose with a quivering rigid movement. He knew, too, that he was more sick than he had ever been in his life and that he had separated himself from all help. He remembered that he had been given a drink and knowing that the sickness would not now diminish but would increase, he went to the bars frantically, desperately, and clung there before he became submerged.

"Officer," he called. He made his voice soft to indicate that any request he made would be normal and reasonable. He heard no answer.

"Officer!" he shouted in his mounting terror.

"What do you want?" the policeman said.

He was standing on a slant away from the cell door, close to the wall, his face set and his eyes narrowed in judgment.

"Can I have just one more drink?"

"That one should hold you till morning."

"God, I'm sick, sick," David whispered. "I've never been like this. Please. Just one more, I'll sleep then. I won't bother you again." The long speech made him gasp.

"You got to break off, you might as well do it now," the policeman said.

"I can't. Not just like that. Oh God, don't make me beg and plead. What harm can it do you?"

"What would you do if I didn't have anything? You'd go without."

"Ohhh," David breathed in a long shuddering wave. He beat his palms on the bars. "Will you please, please, give me the drink? I'm scared, scared. Something's going to happen to me. In the name of God, give me the drink! I'll die."

"All right. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you the one drink and that's the last, you understand?"

"What am I here for?" David asked. "There's no charge against me, is there? I didn't do anything, did I? When can I get out?"

The policeman did not answer these questions. He stared a moment and then walked away.

"Officer?" he called timidly.

"Stop calling," he heard someone shout and then the policeman came into view. "Listen," he said, "this isn't a goddamn hotel room with service." He stood there with the paper cup, making no gesture to set it on the floor.

"I'm sorry," David said. "I didn't mean to disturb you. I thought you might have forgotten and I'm sick."

The policeman put the cup on the floor and pushed it under the bars.

"Remember. That's the last. I don't want to hear any more from you."

He swallowed the drink and put the paper cup down on the floor and stood still with his head bowed.

"Go on, lie down," the policeman said.

"In a minute," David said. "I'm thinking."

What he was thinking was that there was a way out, there had to be a way out, there had to be a way out now while the whisky was with him, for he knew that in an hour or less he would be back at the bars pleading, knocking his head, scraping his nails on the hard black paint of the round steel.

"Remember, that's the last," the policeman said. "Now I'm going

back to my desk and if I hear any more from you, I'll put you down where there's no light and no one will ever hear you. You understand?"

"You wouldn't do that to me, would you?"

"The hell I wouldn't," the policeman said, walking away.

Now, he thought, while I've still got strength. How? Where? Where was the way out? His shoelaces and belt had been removed. They would take him to a hospital. They couldn't, they wouldn't, just leave him there. Even if they took him to an asylum he would get some medicine, a shot of paraldehyde every few hours or something. He had to get out of there. He would have to make sure he groaned loud enough. Just to see the cell door open!

He studied the cell door. There were no horizontal bars. Now he found what he sought, a space of two inches between the masonry at the top and the flat steel holding the upright bars. The bottom of the frame was up six inches from the floor. He stood back from the bars and pulled the turtle-neck sweater over his head and threw it on the boards. Beneath the sweater his thin nylon shirt was pink and clean. He sat down and removed it. It had tails and full sleeves. For a moment he ran his fingers absently over the raised white script of his name. Something crackled in the breast pocket of the shirt. He withdrew a single dollar bill that he laid on the boards, smoothing it out flat. Maybe they would give him a drink to bring him to before they reached the hospital. He would groan a little as they carried him out.

Now he tied one sleeve around his neck snugly but not too tightly and moved the knot around just past one ear. He rose and walked to the bars.

"Davey?" It was Helen.

But he would not hear. The shaking was increasing. He was gulping convulsively. He knew she was not here now and he rejected the voice.

"Davey?" It was Martin now. But Martin knew. He knew this was the way out and back to him. Martin would admire his ingenuity.

"What are you doing, Davey?" Martin asked.

"Ah, wait. You'll see," he said.

"What are you but a lousy drunk?" his father asked. "The same as your mother. Her blood."

"Ah, you!" David whispered. "You!"

He put his feet in separated spaces on the bottom frame between the bars. He reached one hand to the bars and pulled himself up as

high as possible on his toes. With the other hand he pushed the cuff of the loose sleeve between the masonry and the top of the door. He reached out and pulled the sleeve around tight. He made a half hitch about the shirt with the sleeve. He made another half hitch. He was gasping from the effort of holding himself up.

He would groan now, loudly so that the officer would hear and would come to release his body.

"Ahhhh," he rasped.

He let his hands slip a bit. His strength faltered. He could not hear the officer coming. Now one toe slipped from the bottom frame and his weight tightened the sleeves. Frantically he sought a new purchase, blindly he jerked backward as though to tear the shirt. But then he did not care. He could not see. He really did not care any longer. The pink nylon shirt with his embroidered name stretched ropelike with his weight.

## XXXVIII

THERE were thirty-five or forty people present the night Martin spoke. He was to leave with Abbie immediately after the meeting and he wanted to express his gratitude to the group for the help he had received in maintaining his sobriety. For the first time since his high school days, group association had become something other than an enforced attendance. He knew a genuine empathy. Nowhere in the hall was there a person whom he disliked or with whom he was impatient. He was completely relaxed and at peace as he walked slowly to the front and stood behind the speaker's stand.

"My name is Martin. I am an alcoholic. I am a member of this group," he said.

"I have never liked speaking at meetings," Martin said, "because I have been doubtful of the value of what I had to say. But I have an extensive leave of absence from my job and will be away for some time, and I wanted to take this opportunity to express my gratitude for the help this group has given me. As some of you know, I have gone through a period of trial and error. For some of us it seems to be a necessary preparation for the full and final

acceptance of our limitations. For me this was particularly true because I have found the complexities simple and the simple things bewilderingly involved. The twenty-four hour concept which we hear mentioned so often--the simple idea of going one day without one drink and during that day doing the best we can without vexatious questioning of results or dismay at what remains unaccomplished--escaped me entirely. For each day I wanted to reshape the whole world as well as myself--without any effort, of course--and quite of course. I found myself filled with an unbearable loathing because life did not mould itself to the form of my desires. I had no sense of God or of God's will. So I failed and returned and failed again and returned, and always there was the welcoming back without condemnation."

Martin paused for a long moment, not to collect his thoughts but to look at the faces with their expressions of rapt attention and here and there to find an intimate face like a recognizable flower in a profuse growth. In the front row were Helen and Alice. Along one side, with his empty chair beside her, was Abbie. In the fourth row Evelyn sat with Robert. Ralph was absent, living alone now at his camp in New Hampshire. David was dead.

"I could start now to draw a logical sequence which ended in my becoming an alcoholic," Martin said. "I could, with some justification, consider myself a victim of my origins and of circumstances beyond my control. I would prefer to think of it as a trial out of which I have been able to gain some greater measure of those things which are basically human: love, wonder, tenderness, tolerance, pity, hope, and yes, an increased capacity for sensual and sensual enjoyment that alcohol almost destroyed. When I say I thank God for my sobriety, I know now, after a long period of destructive doubt which was really a longing for integrity, that my gratitude is sincere, and more than this, as strange as it may sound and as sceptical as some may be, I am grateful for having become an alcoholic. It has offered an apex of emotion and meaning to a life which might otherwise have remained flat, uneventful, sluggishly sordid."

The small hall was still and Martin heard the entrance door open and close. Ralph appeared and remained standing in the rear by the table on which the coffee and sandwiches were served. He wore a plaid hunting jacket and high shoes into which his pants legs had been tucked. He gave a short wave and Martin smiled while some of the listeners turned to see who had entered.

"I have mentioned God," Martin said. "As you know, in the third



step, we refer to a power greater than ourselves that can restore us to sanity. It is left to each individual to identify this power with whatever he chooses. Yet later steps mention God specifically, though still leaving the conception of God undefined so that any member can seek the God of his understanding without hindrance. I think I would be less than honest, since most members undoubtedly refer to a Christian God, if I did not clarify my use of the word. I do not believe in a Christian God or in any particular God for that matter. I cannot accept the myths and ritual, the social, financial, and political aspects of all organized religions. I do not believe in a personal God or in personal immortality. I am relieved that Alcoholics Anonymous leaves the matter to me, to choose the conception of God I wish or even to reject the idea of God entirely. Simply expressed, I believe God is everything, and when I use the word it is with this sense that I use it."

Martin walked back and forth as he talked. Now he stopped to light a cigarette. Someone had forgotten to put an ash tray on the speaker's stand. He put the match on the bare wood. He knew the success of Alcoholic Anonymous was not evangelical. He felt it rested solidly and practically on a basis of shared experience and the sympathy, friendship, and love this sharing engendered, so now he began to sketch in details of his life and drinking experience. Bringing the account up to his first attempts and failure at continuous sobriety, he said, "I think I was impatient at the struggle of some speakers to shape a thought. The use of common, sentimental clichés annoyed me. To hear the obvious uttered with an air of profundity was particularly irritating. I forgot that the obvious very often is profound and that in the content of the speaker's experience it undoubtedly was. So I did not hear, or rather I heard wrongly, and soon I would be off on a bender and would come back and there would be the same man still sober and happy.

"I know that if it weren't for AA, and in particular this group, I would not be sober tonight unless I was in a hospital or jail. If I were not insane or dead, I would be well along the road. For many months I was miserably sober. I think during these last months I have learned to be happily sober. From listening more intently to others I have come to recognize certain warning signals in myself that help me maintain my sobriety. And always I have to come back to the first two simple thoughts I've heard repeated so often and which were so difficult for me to apprehend. I am an alcoholic, therefore I cannot take one drink in safety because it is the first drink that gets me drunk. And that other thought: today is the

most important day for me as far as booze is concerned. It is this day, it is during this twenty-four hours, that I do not drink. That I did not drink yesterday or that I will not tomorrow is unimportant.

"I do not know what to say to any new person who might be present. Others can present the AA method more clearly and simply than I. I can only say what might have been of value to me at my first meeting, for I was bewildered and unhappy and sick and guilty. The physical illness disappears fairly quickly. If you are carrying a burden of shame, there are no new sins under the sun or any variations of the old ones. Everything you may have done, many of us have done before you and many others will do again. Alcoholism is a disease and the symptoms may break out into all kinds of irrational conduct. Don't be ashamed of it, stay sober and correct it. As this roomful of people attests, it is possible to be sober and to be happy. There is no single gem of wisdom which will resolve everything. Come back and listen to others whose thoughts and experiences might have more meaning to you than those of the speakers you've heard tonight. I am grateful to AA for my sobriety. I am grateful to have had this opportunity to speak."

Martin went past his seat to stand in the rear by Ralph as the meeting was closed.

"Well, how does it go?" he asked.

"Fine, Martin, fine," Ralph said.

"You know, despite the shoes and hunting jacket and being a little tanned, you still look like a vice-president."

Ralph laughed. "I sure don't feel like one. I've been sticking lumber all day. Man, I get weary. I drove down right from work. I wanted to say good-bye to you and Abbie."

"Have you seen your wife and children?"

"No," Ralph said. "I'm going to wait a while longer. I don't want to get thrown for a loop again. You know there are times yet when I feel to blame about the whole thing. I was the man."

"What does it matter who is to blame? No one is to blame. Together you would have continued to destroy each other."

"Yes. The boss has bought a couple of wood lots and we're going to start cutting next week. I'm stronger and calmer now, working hard like I am, Martin. How is Alice?"

"Fine. Anxious to see you, I suppose."

"She's coming up this weekend," Ralph said.

"To stay at the camp?"

"Yes. You don't think it's wrong, do you?"

Martin put his hand on Ralph's shoulder.

"I'm not a moralist, Ralph. I would guess that Alice loves you and needs you quite as much as you need her. Isn't that enough? A gentle, kind immorality is certainly far better than a vindictive morality."

When Helen came over he took her off along one side of the hall.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Oh," she said, "sometimes a little sad. But I feel a great sense of relief, too. I hate to say it."

"Why? I think Davey would smile if he heard you."

"He had already begun to die, Martin. Maybe he had been hurt too deeply to ever recover."

"He must have been."

"I'm going down to Florida to work," Helen said. "I want to be near my son."

"Good. Things will work out, Helen."

Evelyn came striding over and hugged Martin.

"What a nice speaker you are," she said. "But I always knew you were. Where's Abbie? Abbie, come here. Does he talk so nicely about love?"

"Oh," Abbie said, embarrassed.

Evelyn took her apart.

"Now don't fool me, Abbie," she said. "I can see it in your eyes. Is he a nice lover? Will you marry him?"

Abbie laughed, "It's a twenty-four programme," she said, and then seriously, "I'm not a wife or a mother, Evelyn. I don't know if I could be. I just want to give him what I can. Marriage, a home, children, are things that are lost to me and certainly he doesn't want that now. I would be dead. I wouldn't even have known what it was to live. I just want to be with him, Evelyn, that's all."

Evelyn hugged her quickly and let her go, laughing softly.

"Will you write to me, Abbie? Oh, I wish you weren't going. I'm glad Alice will still be here."

"Don't skip the meetings, Evelyn."

"Oh, I won't. Robert won't let me even if I wanted to. Sometimes he comes home from a meeting and he lies in the darkness with me talking till I fall asleep. Come on, let's have some coffee."

Ralph was still uncertain and rather timid. Alice was towards the front and he could not go directly to her. He used members like stepping-stones, working his way with a few words and a hand-

shake up the hall. But when Alice saw him she broke directly away from the people she was talking to.

"You look tanned," she said. "Are you tired?"

"A little bit. You look pretty tonight."

"Have you been getting to bed early?"

"By nine o'clock. I read a little and get sleepy. I'll come down and get you Saturday morning."

"No. You sleep late. It's a long drive down here. I'll take the train up. It gets in at noon and you can meet me. Are you eating plenty?"

"Oh, yes. I'm hungry and I like to cook for myself."

"Are you lonesome living alone?"

"No. I like it after all these years. It's wonderful, Alice, the small things, cutting some wood and starting a fire. Not to come into a house that vibrates with tension. I know lots of alcoholics have trouble living alone but I feel at rest. I go to the Thursday-night meetings in Laconia and sometimes to Tilton on Friday night. It's so good to be working out-of-doors. Alice. Just to breathe and not to worry."

"You look so strong and big in that Mackinaw. You look as if a woman could lean on you."

"I guess I've been doing a little leaning myself," he said. "Alice, I'm taking antabuse. I haven't had any of those tense moments since I left the hospital, but I might. I just don't want to take any chance whatsoever. I've got to learn to live with discomfort when it comes and if the antabuse is in me I won't be able to reach for the quick cure. I know it's not a substitute for AA. I know I'll need AA long after I've stopped taking it. I'm going to take it for a year. I think it will take me a year before I learn to live properly."

"That sounds all right," Alice said. "Let's say good-bye to Martin and have coffee somewhere else."

Robert was standing with Martin.

"I'll miss talking to you," he said. "Will you drop me a line? Do you know I never get any letters, any personal letters. Or if I do they're just details or arrangements. I think I'd like to write some letters myself. There are all those thoughts you get when you are alone. In a letter you could write them down and wonder about them."

"Yes. Letter-writing must be a lost art," Martin said.

"It was good of you and Abbie to come to our aid that time."

"Oh, you would have been all right without us. You and Evelyn together are strong as Prudential." Martin looked slyly at Robert. "And you know, separately, I don't think either of you would be worth a damn."

Robert smiled. "I have no intention of finding out," he said. "Evelyn will miss Abbie."

"Do me a favour," Martin said. "You've been to enough meetings to know the twelfth step about helping other alcoholics. You're not an alcoholic but you could give some help that way. Invite Alice, over there, down to your house. She's not too certain yet. She covers it with a bold approach but underneath she's not quite sure of herself. Evelyn can fuss over her and tell her how to fix her hair. I think they'll like each other."

Robert shook hands with him. "Good luck," he said. "You will write me a line?"

The hall was almost deserted. Tom was stacking folding chairs and Dick was sweeping the floor. Abbie was washing the coffee urn. Martin began to help with the chairs.

"It was nice to hear you speak again," Dick said.

"I wasn't nervous like I used to be."

"You sounded different. You changed with that last drunk."

"I hope so, Dick."

"A society of failures," Dick said. "The only thing I could ever belong to successfully. At least till now."

"When you're away, keep the booze problem simple," Tom said. "Get screwed up as much as you like about the immorality of modern merchandising but keep the booze problem simple."

"All right, Tom. The one drink, the one day. Are you ready, Abbie?"

It was very cold outside. The street was empty except for his parked car. The night was a road, long, straight, remote. Within the car he shivered as he turned on the engine. He waited for it to warm up before starting.

"You're cold," Abbie said. "You're shivering."

"A little from excitement, too. From the strangeness of leaving."

She took both his hands in hers and leaned to kiss him, then she held his head down against her breast. His shivering ceased.

"Do you want to drive tonight?" she asked. "We can stop at the first motel and sleep if you'd rather."

"I'd rather drive. All night. Just the two of us alone, Abbie. I looked up the address of the AA secretary in Mexico City."

"Mexico?"

"Why not? We have all the time we need."

"It seems so far."

"The sun there may shine more simply than it does here in New England. I'd like to know."

He raised his head and kissed her.

"I haven't said it before, I couldn't say it, Martin. I love you."

He felt the softness of her waist below her ribs as she pressed against him and he knew that for both of them their lust was good, their passion clean, their love undefiled by either the past or the present. There was no longer any need for definition.

